

Parish farms and the poor law: a response to unemployment in rural southern England, c.1815–35*

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Abstract

Finding a ‘solution’ for the seemingly intractable problem of unemployment in post-Napoleonic rural England was the Holy Grail for many vestries. Yet, whilst we know much about the depth and consequences of unemployment, parish-driven schemes to set the poor to work have been subjected to remarkably little in the way of systematic study. This paper focuses on one such policy that remains entirely obscure: parish farms, the hiring of pre-existing farms or fields by the parish on which to employ those out of work. Bearing a ‘family resemblance’ to allotments and other land-based attempts to alleviate poverty, parish farms were unique in that they were managed by the parish and were an employment strategy as opposed to a scheme to supplement the incomes of the poor. Whilst the archive of parish farms is often frustratingly opaque, it is shown that, before they were effectively outlawed by the New Poor Law, many southern parishes, especially in the Weald of Kent and Sussex, adopted the scheme, occasionally with great success.

On my return from attending our county assizes, Mr. Tye, one of the Overseers of the Poor of this parish, brought me a letter ... relative to the management of the poor of this parish, and particularly as to the management and good effect the parish feel from a farm which is rented and used for the benefit of the parish ... The farm consists of nearly [five] hundred acres; and a certain number (eight) of the principal inhabitants in the parish, of which I am one, hire the farm as trustees for the parish ... I conceive, and I have taken some pains to ascertain it, that the farm lessens the Poores Rate from 4s. to 5s. in the pound.¹

Historians of Swing disagree on many aspects of the great rural rising of 1830 but universally concur that it was the experience of pauperization, and specifically un- and under-employment,

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¹ J. Austen, Cranbrook to Thomas Frankland Lewis, London, 24 Mar. 1817, pr. in *British Parliamentary Papers (BPP)*, 1817, VI, Report from the Select Committee on the poor laws, p. 163.

that framed the protests.² As is well understood, the huge backwash of demobbed soldiers returning to England on the cessation of hostilities against France, combined with the concurrent collapse in cereal and other agricultural prices, led to a sudden and deep rural depression which lasted from 1815 until the mid-1830s. The increased supply of labour, when juxtaposed with farmers' declining demand – and ability to pay – for fieldworkers, led to an immediate and dramatic rise in unemployment in late 1815. Apart from brief 'recoveries' in 1820–21 and 1827, the problem of unemployment persisted. Thus from the onset of the post-war agricultural depression until the major shifts in rural social policy which occurred after – and partly as a result of – Swing, attempts to find employment for those out of work and reduce the costs of supporting them exercised every parish in the south and east of England for most of two decades.

Such problems define the social and economic history of the post-Napoleonic period. And yet, whilst attempts to quantify unemployment have been central to much research on poverty in the English countryside,³ attempts to alleviate unemployment have been subject to remarkably few studies. Gash's brief, and almost 70-year-old paper, Todd's study of a post-Swing scheme in Eastbourne, and Flinn's examination of the 1817 'Poor Employment Act' remain the only systematic analyses.⁴ Notwithstanding this historiographical lacuna, we know that parishes adopted numerous schemes in their attempt to solve this seemingly intractable problem. Roundsman schemes – where those out of employ were engaged in turn by farmers with wages either fully or partly paid by the rates – together with labour rates, road working and the use of workhouse manufactories, are all recognized as 'solutions' in the voluminous poor law literature but await thorough study.⁵ One important policy response, though, remains entirely obscure: the parish farm. As detailed in the quote at the head of this paper, parish farms were either pre-existing farms or blocks of land hired directly by the parish or by trustees acting for the parish on which those out of work were employed. Whilst there was a difference in scale between these two forms of parish farm, there was no distinction in their social policy purpose. Work was thereby found for the workless and the produce of the farm could be sold to cover the costs of the scheme, and maybe even turn a profit for the parish.

² E. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing* (1969); P. Jones, 'Swing, Speenhamland and rural social relations: the "moral economy" of the English crowd in the nineteenth century', *Social Hist.* 32 (2007), pp. 271–90.

³ D. Baugh, 'The cost of poor relief in south-east England, 1790–1834', *EcHR* 28 (1975), pp. 50–68; M. Blaug, 'The myth of the Old Poor Law', *JECH* 23 (1963), pp. 151–84; G. Fussell and M. Compton, 'Agricultural adjustments after the Napoleonic Wars', *Economic Hist.* 4 (1939), pp. 184–204; B. Song, 'Landed interest, local government, and the labour market in England, 1750–1850', *EcHR* 51 (1998), pp. 465–88; id., 'Agrarian policies on pauper settlement and migration', *Continuity and Change*, 13 (1998), pp. 363–89. For a useful summary of these trends see K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the labouring poor: Social change and agrarian England,*

1660–1900 (1985), ch. 1.

⁴ The scheme detailed by Todd bears a passing resemblance to parish farms, however it differed in that the cultivation of land hitherto uncultivated was projected and underwritten by a local landowner rather than by the parish. N. Gash, 'Rural unemployment, 1815–34', *EcHR* 6 (1935), pp. 90–3; A. Todd, 'An answer to poverty in Sussex, 1830–45', *AgHR* 4 (1956), pp. 45–51; M. Flinn, 'The Poor Employment Act of 1817', *EcHR* 14 (1961), pp. 82–92. For an inspiring, if initial, attempt to understand the experience of rural unemployment see: J. Burnett, *Idle hands: The experience of unemployment, 1790–1990* (1994), ch. 1.

⁵ For such a fleeting reference see J. Poynter, *Society and pauperism: English ideas on poor relief, 1795–1834* (1969), p. 11.

In the context of the period between 1815 and 1835, parish farms were made possible by the ready availability of unoccupied farms. In January 1822 – the nadir of the post-Napoleonic depression – it was reported that ‘a great number’ of ‘moderately sized farms’ were available to rent due to the ‘oppressive and ruinous’ poor rates. During that summer, 19 farms were reported to be unoccupied in Mayfield (Sussex) alone.⁶

Parish farms could take two forms, the first the hire of a pre-existing farm or an individual field by the parish, the second the renting of a single field or block of previously uncultivated land. It is important to note that parish farms were managed by the parish, and as such were very different to allotments, where the parish might hire the land but did not manage or underwrite its cultivation. Inevitably there was some confusion, not least because parishes might use post-enclosure ‘allotments’ of land to create parish farms.⁷ Nor were parish farms the same thing as potato grounds – plots of land let by the parish to poor families for one season alone⁸ – poor lands or pastures granted on enclosure,⁹ or workhouse ‘gardens’.¹⁰ Parish farms were also distinct from schemes where vestries contracted with farmers to provide labourers to engage in spade husbandry.¹¹

The advantages of such a scheme were clear. To the landowner it generated rent and kept land cultivated that otherwise might have been left fallow. To farmers, parish farms had the advantage that the parish was still managing the labourer, as opposed to allowing him the degree of independence from wage labour that potato plots and allotments supposedly offered. As Burchardt has found, farmers were often vehemently opposed to landowner-sponsored allotment schemes. Besides, it is important to note that allotments were not intended to eliminate the need for waged labour but to supplement wages. As a solution for unemployment, allotments were of limited scope.¹² Even the allotment-eulogizing Labourers’ Friend Society published a letter in 1833 praising the positive effects of a parish farm at Margate.¹³

Before analysing the location and dates of adoption of parish farms in southern England – the region where the post-1815 depression hit hardest and where rural unemployment was most acute – as well as their size and effects, the paper considers how the poor law framed the ways in which rural vestries dealt with unemployment. Moreover, as the totemic status of Speenhamland-type wage supplements in the poor law literature attests, parishes and the

⁶ *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, 21 Jan. 1822; *Sussex Advertiser*, 26 Aug. 1822.

⁷ For such an example see: Hampshire Record Office (HRO), 25M60 PV1, Fawley Vestry Minute, 13 Apr. 1820. Typically such lands were let on commercial terms to local farmers rather than being farmed by the parish: S. Shave, ‘The dependent poor? (Re)constructing the lives of individuals “on the parish” in rural Dorset, 1800–32’, *Rural Hist.*, 20 (2009), p. 74.

⁸ J. Burchardt, *The allotment movement in England, 1793–1873* (2002), pp. 13–14, 241–55.

⁹ See R. W. Hoyle and C. Spencer, ‘The Slaidburn poor pasture: changing configurations of popular politics in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century village’, *Social Hist.* 31 (2006), pp. 182–205.

¹⁰ For a workhouse garden at Alverstoke (Hampshire)

see S. Shave, ‘The welfare of the vulnerable in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: Gilbert’s Act of 1782’, *History in Focus* 14 (2008), <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/welfare/articles/shaves.html>.

¹¹ For instance, in 1819 the Westbury Vestry established a committee to contract with farmers to provide parish-paid labourers to act in ‘having land dug’: Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre (WSHC), 548/2, Westbury Vestry minute, 23 Sept. 1819.

¹² For farmer critiques of potato plots and allotments see J. Burchardt, ‘Rural social relations, 1830–50: opposition to allotments for labourers’, *AgHR* 45 (1997), pp. 165–75.

¹³ Reprinted in Labourers’ Friend Society, *The labourer’s friend: a selection from the publication of the Labourers’ Friend Society* (1835), pp. 244–6.

local authorities also innovated in poor law policy. This was, as the following sections show, especially the case in relation to under- and unemployment, with legislative support for parish farms coming only in response to successful parochial experiments.

I

From the middle of the eighteenth century, rapid rural population growth and the decline of living-in service combined with a structurally driven lessening of demand for field workers to create a growing pool of labourers unable to find constant employment. Increasing capitalization and consolidation of farms also meant that large farmers were not only capable of exploiting the increasing pool of labour by hiring by the week, by the day, or by the piece, but their need to secure a return on their capital meant that they were driven to change the way in which labour was engaged. The result was an evermore acute seasonality in agrarian employment, and, therefore, rural unemployment.¹⁴ In the south, this dynamic was also exacerbated by structural changes in rural industries. The once prosperous cloth and linen industry in the Weald, centred on Cranbrook (Kent), had all but disappeared by the start of the eighteenth century. The cloth industries of the west were also in terminal decline. The fortunes of the silk, lace and glove industries were highly variable, as were the fortunes of cottage industries. For instance, the wire button industry that in the 1790s had employed 4,000 workers in and around the north Dorset town of Shaftesbury had disappeared completely by the 1830s.¹⁵

If patterns of decline were uneven, the structural processes were universal. By the turn of the nineteenth century, according to Barbara Kerr, every parish in Dorset was ‘pulling along landless labourers who could not find, or keep, regular employment’, a situation that applied almost universally in the south.¹⁶ This was not some sudden shift. In April 1780, the vestry of the Berkshire parish of Shinfield resolved that it would no longer relieve able-bodied men unless they laboured for each rate-payer in turn ‘for as many days as shall be in proportion to the rates every man is charged to the poor’.¹⁷ Shinfield was not alone. The extant vestry records

¹⁴ Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*, p. 94; A. Armstrong, *Farmworkers: A social and economic history, 1770–1980* (1988), pp. 30–43; B. Reay, *Rural England: Labouring lives in the nineteenth century* (2004), ch. 2; J. Neeson, *Commoners: Common right, enclosure and social change in England, 1700–1820* (1993), ch. 7. As Brian Short and, most recently, Nigel Goose, Alun Howkins and Nicola Verdon have noted though, farm service persisted well into the middle of the nineteenth century in some parts of the south: B. Short, ‘The decline of living-in servants in the transition to capitalist farming: a critique of the Sussex evidence’, *Sussex Archaeological Coll.* 122 (1984), pp. 147–64; N. Goose, ‘Farm service, seasonal unemployment and casual labour in mid nineteenth-century England’, *AgHR* 54 (2006), pp. 274–303; A. Howkins and N. Verdon, ‘Adaptable and sustainable? Male farm service and

the agricultural labour force in Midland and southern England, c.1850–1925’, *EcHR* 61 (2008), pp. 467–95.

¹⁵ P. Hastings, ‘The old poor law, 1640–1834’, in N. Yates, R. Hume, and P. Hastings (eds), *Religion and society in Kent, 1640–1914* (1994), p. 112; P. Brandon, *The Kent and Sussex Weald* (2003), pp. 148–52; N. Raven, ‘“A humbler, industrious class of female”: women’s employment and industry in the small towns of southern England, c.1790–1840’, in P. Lane, N. Raven and K. D. M. Snell (eds), *Women, work and wages in England, 1600–1850* (2004); M. Berg, *The age of manufactures, 1700–1820: Industry, innovation and work* (1994), pp. 94–6.

¹⁶ B. Kerr, *Bound to the soil. A social history of Dorset, 1750–1919* (1968), p. 93.

¹⁷ Berkshire Record Office (BRO), D/P 110/8/1, Shinfield Vestry Minute, 17 Apr. 1780.

of Berkshire parishes reveal that in the ensuing eleven years the parishes of Drayton (September 1784), East Hendred (December 1786), Kingston Lisle (November 1791) and Tilehurst (1795) all made similar pronouncements.¹⁸ As Snell has claimed, by the 1780s, parish relief was no longer as generous in the rural south as it once had been.¹⁹

The outbreak of war with revolutionary France in 1792 did not lead to a significantly better situation for rural workers. Indeed, the notion that the Napoleonic Wars represented a 'golden age' for rural labourers has been dismissed. Rent and provision inflation more than eroded the temporary, and spatially uneven, increases in labouring wages.²⁰ Nor did the period witness full employment. Notwithstanding a tightening of the labour market between 1792 and 1815, Samantha Williams has noted that demand for labour was increasingly seasonal and so insecure, with unemployment and under-employment becoming 'pervasive for the many men and boys employed in agriculture'.²¹

If there were recent precedents for both rural unemployment and for attempts by vestries to lessen the burden of their costs, nothing could prepare them for what followed the cessation of hostilities between Britain and France.²² In the words of Rev. Gleig of Waltham near Canterbury, 'multitudes of disbanded soldiers and sailors ... [were] sent back to their parishes' leading to 'a competition among the men to find masters'. An initial resistance to reduced wages inevitably led to farmers 'striking off a certain number from their employ leading to numbers of young, healthy, and willing persons [who] no longer knew where to apply for a day's work'. According to Gleig, '[vestries] could neither understand nor manage it. They would not listen to the applications of the young and healthy, but refused them peremptorily both relief and employment'.²³

As the agricultural depression deepened, so the problem of unemployment worsened. By March 1821 in the 40 parishes of the Battle Petty Sessions District there were, so reckoned the clerk to the Bench, some 1,000 men 'with no useful employment'.²⁴ Indeed, it was the Weald where the agricultural depression hit hardest, with many hitherto successful petty agriculturalists forced into day labouring, thus further swelling the ranks of the unemployed.²⁵ It was reported in 1823 that in 16 Kentish Wealden parishes, out of a total population of 21,719, inhabitants there were 8,263 paupers of whom 682 were unemployed men. The situation over the county border at Burwash was worse still. Over half of the 2,000 residents were paupers, whilst during the winter 80 to 90 men were constantly out of work, of whom 20 to 40 were out of employment *throughout* the year. Even in the relatively prosperous coastal plains of West Sussex 'a great many men' were out of employ, the result of, according to a Select Committee

¹⁸ M. Neuman, *The Speenhamland county: Poverty and the poor law in Berkshire, 1782-1834* (1982), p. 186.

¹⁹ Snell, *Annals of the labouring poor*, pp. 37-8, 91.

²⁰ R. Wells, 'The moral economy of the English countryside', in A. Randall and A. Charlesworth (eds), *Moral economy and popular protest: Crowds, conflict and authority* (2000), pp. 229-31; Snell, *Annals of the labouring poor*, pp. 87-98.

²¹ S. Williams, 'Malthus, marriage and poor law allowances revisited: a Bedfordshire case study, 1770-1834', *AgHR* 52 (2004), pp. 58, 78.

²² Armstrong, *Farmworkers*, p. 64.

²³ G. Gleig, *The chronicles of Waltham* (1835), pp. 80-1.

²⁴ BPP, 1821, IX, 'Report from the Select Committee to whom several petitions complaining of the depressed state of the agriculture of the United Kingdom were referred', pp. 95-7.

²⁵ *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, 21 Jan. 1822.

²⁶ BPP, 1823, V, 'Report from the Select Committee on poor rate returns', p. 19; Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, p. 74.

respondent, an increased resort to threshing machines.²⁶ After some improvement in the fortunes of agrarian capitalism in the mid-1820s, the situation again deteriorated. By 1828 unemployment rates amongst agricultural labourers were as bad, if not worse, than during the early 1820s. At West Grinstead in Sussex, 86 of the 300 settled labourers were employed by the parish. Neighbouring Shipley was similarly overwhelmed. Out of 240 agricultural labourers in the parish, 192 were supported in some form by the parish. Of these, between 40 and 80 labourers – with a core of 26 single men – were employed by the parish.²⁷

II

At the heart of the 1601 Poor Law Act was the instruction that whilst overseers were to relieve the 'lame, impotent, old, blind, etc., being poor and not able to work' the unemployed were to be set to work 'on a convenient stock of flax, hemp, wool, thread, iron, and other necessary ware and stuff'.²⁸ 'Nowhere', declared the reforming House of Commons Select Committee of 1817, did the Act of 1601 '[give] warrant for simple relief other than employment'.²⁹ Ambiguities in defining 'not able to work' meant that, in practice, overseers had almost complete discretion in deciding who to relieve and who to employ, although local magistrates had the power to override overseers' and vestry decisions. Whilst historians have considered the provision of employment for those out of work as the weakest 'pillar of policy' in the Elizabethan poor laws, it was still central to the poor law's parochial operation. Hindle has alerted us to the importance of the practice of apprenticing pauper children and other ad-hoc parochial schemes to set the poor to work, challenging Fletcher's contention that 'the provision of work was generally undertaken only during the harsh conditions of dearth'. Setting the poor to work, Hindle has concluded, was a major part of parish practice from the very earliest days of the poor law.³⁰

Parochial attempts to employ the poor followed a broadly similar course from the late seventeenth century to the mid-eighteenth, although parishes that became part of urban incorporations or adopted Knatchbull's (Workhouse Test) Act of 1722 were supposed to relieve

²⁷ BPP, 1828, IV, 'Report from the Select Committee relating to the employment or relief of able-bodied persons from the poor rates', pp. 17–19 and 25–9.

²⁸ 43 Elizabeth (1601) c.2. See Snell, *Annals of the labouring poor*, pp. 37–8 and 91; R. Wells, 'Migration, the law, and parochial policy in Eighteenth and early nineteenth-century southern England', *Southern Hist.*, 15 (1993), pp. 87–139; Poynter, *Society and pauperism*, p. 14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁰ A. Fletcher, *Reform in the provinces: The government of Stuart England* (1986), p. 213; S. Hindle, *The birthpangs of welfare: Poor relief and parish governance in seventeenth-century Warwickshire* (Dugdale Soc., Occasional Papers 40, 2000), pp. 13–14. Thirsk has also highlighted the importance of 'projectors' in employing the poor in the early seventeenth-century.

J. Thirsk, 'Projects for gentlemen, jobs for the poor: mutual aid in the Vale of Tewkesbury, 1600–1630', in Thirsk, *The rural economy of England: Collected essays* (1984), pp. 287–307.

³¹ In many ways though this Act formalized existing practices, indeed from as early as the mid-1710s the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge was promoting the establishment of workhouses in urban and rural parishes alike and in turn built upon a movement that had begun in the 1690s: T. Hitchcock, 'Paupers and preachers: the SPCK and the parochial workhouse movement', in L. Davison, T. Hitchcock, T. Keirn, and R. Shoemaker (eds), *Stilling the grumbling hive: The response to social and economic problems in England, 1689–1750* (1992), pp. 145–66; J. Broad, 'Parish economies of welfare, 1650–1834', *Historical J.* 42 (1999), pp. 985–1006.

all those out of work institutionally.³¹ Whilst parochial workhouses were widely adopted, few were the places in the rural south that invested in serious workhouse-based manufactories. Nor was the workhouse test always systematically applied. The 'revival' of the test in the 1820s as a measure against rising poor rates was severely challenged by fluctuating levels of unemployment.³² Of arguably far greater importance was the impact of Speenhamland-type relief practices upon employment provision. Whilst claims to their universal influence have been shown to be overplayed – and post-1822 there is evidence that parishes were moving away from systematic wage subsidies³³ – as Wells has posited, such payments became 'embedded in the principal cornlands'. Most counties enacted the Speenhamland principles through the adoption of static allowances in aid-of-wages as dependent on family size, hence 'constituting *de facto* child allowances'.³⁴

Where Speenhamland-type policies operated, all labourers' wages were effectively subsidized by the parish, which meant that it only took one farmer to lower their labourers' wages to force the parish to increase the subsidy. The fragile parochial balance disturbed, agricultural wages were placed in a downward spiral and local labour markets thrown into crisis. The result, as Snell has put it, was that 'free labour [had] to become pauperized to find employment'.³⁵ The logical extension of this system was for the parish to act as the labour market controller, determining how many labourers each occupier should employ – and then subsidizing each and every labourer through roundsman and labour-allocation schemes.

Speenhamland-type manipulations of local labour markets incensed those who avowed a strict adherence to the tenets of political economy, for it failed to reward the utility of the labour performed. By 1827, over 30 years after the notorious Speenhamland meeting, the Berkshire magistrates had realized the effect of the earlier policy: 'the reward of industry' had been reduced to bare subsistence, and that therefore they would no longer set a minimum wage, instead wages 'should best find their own level'. Moreover, justices were now to 'use powers' to correct 'this abuse'.³⁶ The 1828 Select Committee on the employment of labourers from the Poor Rates believed it should be made illegal to aid the wages of labourers from the poor rate, adding that the 'right to employment' was at odds with the law. In future, the market alone should determine labourers' wages.³⁷

Whilst such pronouncements were not official government policy and were unenforceable, they echoed broader misgivings about supporting labourers' wages from the poor rates. At the level of the parish, such uncertainties were largely driven by roundsman and labour allocation schemes, the manipulation of labour markets enraging many ratepayers who not only had to subsidize the wages of the farmers' men but who had also to engage labourers themselves. The vestry books of southern parishes are replete with examples of roundsman schemes failing

³² Poynter, *Society and pauperism*, pp. 192–3; S. King, *Poverty and welfare in England 1700–1850: a regional perspective* (2000), p. 164.

³³ Neuman, *Speenhamland county*, p. 165; Baugh, 'The cost of poor relief', pp. 60–4; G. Boyer, 'Malthus was right after all: poor relief and birth rates in south-eastern England', *J. Political Economy* 97 (1989), p. 96. See also Williams, 'Malthus, marriage and poor law

allowances revisited'.

³⁴ R. Wells, 'Historical trajectories: English social welfare systems, rural riots, popular politics, agrarian trade unions, and allotment provision, 1793–1896', *Southern Hist.* 25 (2003), p. 89.

³⁵ Snell, *Annals of the labouring poor*, p. 27.

³⁶ *Reading Mercury*, 15 Jan. 1827.

³⁷ BPP, 1828, IV, p. 4

when ratepayers refused to employ the labourers allocated to them.³⁸ Against this backdrop of high costs, equity issues, ratepayer opposition, and a lack of legal enforceability for allocation schemes,³⁹ alternative 'solutions' to rural unemployment were eagerly sought.

Parish farms were one such alternative. Whilst their potential for becoming self-financing was an obvious attraction, keeping labourers employed in agriculture had strong resonances with other schemes attempting to 'relieve' the poor on the land. As Poynter and Burchardt note, before the start of the Napoleonic Wars there were few advocates of such schemes although no less a figure than Arthur Young was a vocal supporter. Thereafter there was a marked increase, reflecting concerns over scarcity, the relief of poverty and national security.⁴⁰ Invariably proposals focused either on providing the poor with cattle (and access to pasture), gardens, potato grounds, or allotments and/or smallholdings, often suggesting such land should be enclosed from the waste. Thus, whilst one should not equate all such schemes as being essentially the same thing – as Burchardt reminds us, they were quite distinct – they were not directly concerned with offering employment to those out of work. Even proto-Owenite attempts to 'remove labourers from the need to labour by converting them into "yeoman" or small farmers' were not driven by a desire to reduce unemployment but rather to remodel the structure of English rural society.⁴¹ However, that the first parish farm was founded in 1794 whilst such debates were raging is at least suggestive of the impact of the debates on the pioneers of parish farming.

III

As noted, parish farms are little known and even less well understood. References to them in the 'recent' historiography of the poor laws and social conditions are few. Besides a couple of references to their existence in John Burnett's excellent study of the experience of unemployment between 1790 and 1990, most other recent references are found in Poynter's 40-year-old study of poor relief in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England, Keith-Lucas's 30-year-old study of the unreformed English local government system, and Mark Neuman's study of the operation of the old poor laws in Berkshire.⁴² To the first historians of the poor law, parish farms were not so obscure, warranting more than a passing reference. Mavor's 1893 study of 'labor colonies' as a solution to unemployment noted that historically the parish farm was the closest antecedent. According to Mavor, parish farms dated from 'at least the beginning of the eighteenth century' and were abandoned in 1834 on the Poor Law

³⁸ For an excellent example of opposition see the case of Rev. Wake of Over Wallop (Hants.) against his vestry's policy of 'the stemming of men': HRO, 15M84/Z3/61, Rev. Henry Wake, *Abuse of the Poor-Rate!! A statement of facts* (1818); *Hampshire Chronicle*, 26 Apr. 1819.

³⁹ The 1824 Select Committee on the Employment of Agricultural Labourers had also noted the potential problems and duly offered their support for a bill placed before parliament that would give legal sanction

to labour rates. Despite their support, the bill never reached the statute book. BPP, 1824, VI, 'Report from the Select Committee on labourers wages'.

⁴⁰ Poynter, *Society and pauperism*, pp. 98–105; Burchardt, *Allotment movement*, pp. 11–22.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 12.

⁴² Burnett, *Idle hands*, pp. 32–3, 39; Poynter, *Society and pauperism*, p. 14; B. Keith-Lucas, *The unreformed local government system* (1980), pp. 82–3; Neuman, *Speenhamland County*, pp. 189.

Commission's belief that '[they] had failed of their objects, and had been proved to be sources of malversation'.⁴³

Nicholls's *History of the English Poor Law* (1854) also went beyond merely noting their existence. To Nicholls, an ardent political economist, it was 'singular' that the Select Committee on the Poor Laws of 1817 'should speak favourably of establishing parochial farms as a means of affording employment'; to his mind it was a gross manipulation of local labour markets. Besides, the committee's recommendation was, he harrumphed, 'seemingly influenced' by the example of only two 'apparently successful practice[s] in the county of Kent'. The result of this recommendation was a clause in the Poor Relief Act – the second of the Sturges Bourne Acts – that permitted parishes to utilize up to 20 acres of land to employ any persons 'as by law are directed to be set to work'. With this support and encouragement, Nicholls believed, without adducing any evidence, that parish farms became 'well known in most parts of England'. In his native Southwell (Nottinghamshire), 'a parish farm had been adopted', a policy he railed against as, during the winter months, the Southwell farmers had 'turn[ed] over their men to the parish farm' instead of finding them employment.⁴⁴

Sidney and Beatrice Webb acknowledged the existence of parish farms but were hardly less critical in their assessment. Parish farms, they claimed, were 'a common panacea' in 'bad times', 'applicants' for employment being set to work digging. It was 'extremely dubious', though, whether the 'small and costly crop of potatoes thus raised contributed towards the wages paid to the labourers'. Still, they too noted that the 1817 Select Committee was positively inclined to parish farms, and that the subsequent Act encouraged labourers so employed to be paid 'reasonable wages' and have the status of 'independent' wage earners. Here their analysis became impressionistic. Acknowledging that there was only 'scanty information' on parish farms, they concluded that most schemes were 'brief experiments, quickly abandoned as unsuccessful, with unsatisfactory financial results'. Most of this evidence though came from the ideologically driven and, in the words of Tawney, 'wildly unhistorical document', the 1834 Poor Law Report.⁴⁵

Given that the 1834 Report was a broadside against all poor law innovations since Knatchbull's Act, that the authors of the Report criticized rather than praised parish farms is perhaps unsurprising. But that the Report – and the voluminous appendices – mentioned parish farms at all is testimony to their importance. The Report described a parish farm occupied by the incorporated parishes of the Isle of Wight, and in the appendices detailed parish farms at Calne (Wiltshire), Poole (Dorset), Boldre (Hampshire), Ash, Brenchley, Cranbrook, High Halden, Margate and Wye (Kent), Writtle (Essex), Oundle (Northamptonshire), and Shipley and Ticehurst (Sussex).⁴⁶ The farm on the Isle of Wight, it was related, had employed 240 men in the period immediately preceding Swing. They 'scarcely did any work' but were still paid at

⁴³ J. Mavor, 'Labor colonies and the unemployed', *J. Political Economy* 2 (1893), pp. 26–7.

⁴⁴ G. Nicholls, *A history of the English Poor Law*, (3 vols, 1898 edn), II, pp. 173–4, 202–4; 59 Geo III (1819) c.12.

⁴⁵ S. Webb and B. Webb, *English local government*, VII, *English poor law history*, pt 1, *The Old Poor Law*

(1927), pp. 227–8, 230; R. Tawney, *Religion and the rise of capitalism* (1926), p. 272. For the report see BPP, 1834, XLIV, 'Report from His Majesty's commissioners for inquiring into the administration and practical operation of the poor laws'.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 26–7, 288, 294, 295–6, 445, 489–90, 492–3, 498, 512–3, 830, 1156–7, 1954, 2121, 4323.

the same wages 'as those usually given by the farmers'. According to squire George Courthope, the parish farm at Ticehurst had been 'attended with [unspecified] evil consequences', whilst at Brenchley it was suggested that young men, rather than turn their hands to thatching, hedging or ditching, 'prefer[red] to linger on the parish farm'.⁴⁷ And yet, whilst such critiques were hardly surprising given the ideological positioning of the committee, some of the committee's respondents were actually positive about the impact of parish farms. The farm at Poole was said to be 'really productive', and at Writtle it was thought that the farm encouraged industry and gave a good training to those young men who would otherwise be employed on the roads. The most positive comment though was left for the large parish farm at Cranbrook. According to Ashurst Majendie, the farm was established in 1774 (it was actually established in 1794) and had not only industriously employed many of those who would otherwise been out of employ, but had also kept the rates lower than in many of the adjoining parishes, making a 'direct pecuniary return to the parish funds'. It also kept a large farm in a high state of cultivation when, post-1815, many farms remained unoccupied.⁴⁸

The Cranbrook parish farm, and another farm at nearby Benenden, founded in 1806, were first brought to wider attention by the 1817 Select Committee on the Poor Laws. As related in the quotation that introduces this paper, the Cranbrook farm consisted of 499 acres. In fact, it was two separate farms combined: Sissinghurst Castle Farm (360) acres and Brickkiln Farm (139 acres). Sissinghurst Castle was also used as the parish workhouse, being capable of accommodating 100 people. This was the first known example of a parish farm in England.⁴⁹ According to the report submitted to the Committee by Sir John Sinclair, the founder of the Board of Agriculture under Pitt the Younger, the Cranbrook farm had had the effect of keeping poor rates at 8s. in the pound whilst in neighbouring parishes they were typically 14 or 15s., saving, so the parish estimated, £1,650 a year. In addition, it equipped poor boys with ploughing, team driving and other husbandry skills, whilst the girls were taught how to milk cows and, as a result, found service at an earlier age than otherwise would have been the case. At a time, Sinclair continued, when so many farms were unoccupied and their buildings falling into decay, it was 'a favourable time to try the experiment' on the model adopted at Cranbrook beyond Kent. Mr. Epps, the 'overseer' of the workhouse concurred. The plan of renting parish farms was 'by far the best system to be adopted for the advantage of the poor in country parishes'.⁵⁰

With such positive support, the second 'Sturges Bourne Act' contained a clause that allowed parishes to 'purchase, or to hire and take on lease for and on account of the parish' up to 20 acres to 'employ and set to work in the cultivation of such land ... any such persons as by law they are directed to set to work'. Individuals so employed were to be paid 'reasonable wages' and subjected to the same punishments as 'other Labourers in Husbandry are by law entitled and subject to'. In short, parish farms were to be encouraged, and labourers so employed were to be given, in the words of the Webbs, the 'status of independent wage-earners'.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 26–7, 4323, 1159.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 294, 512–13, 445, 489–90.

⁴⁹ BPP, 1817, VI, pp. 163–5; Centre for Kentish Studies (CKS), P100/8/2, Cranbrook vestry minute, 11 Apr. 1794.

⁵⁰ BPP, 1817, VI, pp. 163–5.

⁵¹ 59 Geo. III (1819), c.85, s.19; Webbs, *Old Poor Law*, p. 228.

IV

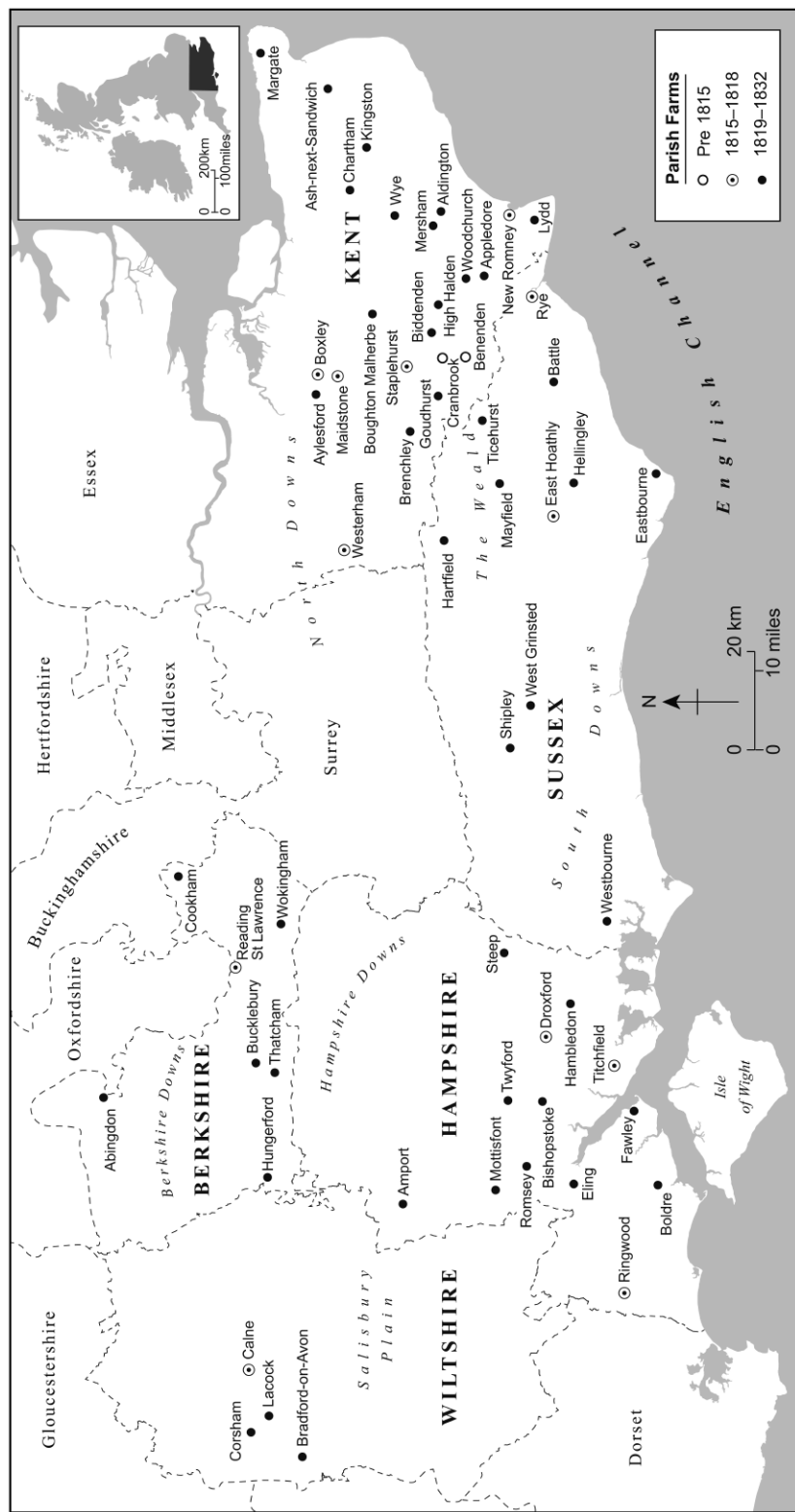
The archive of parish governance has an illusory quality, offering great riches yet often disappointing in terms of depth of geographical coverage and survival rates. Given that parish farms were administered by the parish, these dynamics necessarily structure how we understand their geographical distribution and dates of adoption. Moreover, because the survival rate of vestry books – the most important source for determining parish farm adoption – has a distinct spatiality, our understanding of the geography of parish farms is probably skewed.⁵² The further west the county, the lower the coverage of useful vestry minutes for the period of study. For instance, whilst only 42 of the 391 parishes (11 per cent) in Wiltshire for the period 1815 to 1830 have surviving vestry minutes detailing poor law matters (whether recorded in vestry books or overseers' account books), neighbouring Hampshire has an equivalent survival rate of 15 per cent (52 out of 337 parishes) and Sussex 21 per cent (73 out of 346 parishes). Even this consideration does not take into account the fact that many vestry books are effectively only *de facto* overseers' disbursement books, rarely detailing policy pronouncements. This does not mean that such parishes were not formulating policy. Rather, policy was either unrecorded or the parish took an 'on the hoof' approach, pragmatically responding to needs through the lens of past practice. Adopting a parish farm was a major decision though, both in terms of cost and the impact on the broader parochial social policy. As such, it would be more likely that the decision to set up a parish farm would be detailed – even if subsequent records relating to its management were thin – compared to other less costly employment provision relief schemes.

With these provisos in mind, and combining parish records with parliamentary and newspaper reports, Map 1 details the location and founding date (if known) of southern parish farms. Initially, from 1815, parish farms were founded in a relatively narrow arc around the pre-existing farms at Cranbrook and Benenden. Whilst early adopting parishes made no explicit reference as to why they turned to parish farms, it was, in the words of the *Maidstone Journal* when reporting a scheme at Maidstone, 'to give occupation to the labouring poor out of work'. It would appear that the local examples of Cranbrook and Benenden were important.⁵³ Even before the proselytizing efforts of the 1817 poor law committee, these farms would appear to have been well known in the Weald, and mid- and south Kent.

In December 1816, the *Kentish Gazette* gave over a whole column to reprinting Sinclair's account of the Cranbrook and Benenden farms. The 36-acre Beaconhill Farm at Benenden had been hired in 1806 at an annual rent of £62 10s. *od.*, and, combined with several other fields, gave a total rental of £111 16s. *od.* Initially, the farm had been taken on 'with the view of diminishing by means of the profit it yields, the burden of the poor rates', though as the previous 'scarcity of labourers' was reversed, 'some extra hands' were employed. A profit of £206 in 1815 fell to £160 in 1816, a reflection of both declining prices and the farm's increased

⁵² For a consideration of the impact of geographically uneven archival coverage on our attempts to 'map' the past: C. Griffin, 'Knowable geographies? The reporting of incendiarism in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English provincial press', *J. Historical Geography* 32 (2006), pp. 38–56.

⁵³ CKS, P309/8/8, New Romney vestry minute, 3 Dec. 1815; East Sussex Record Office (ESRO), PAR378/12/3, East Hoathly vestry minute, 28 Feb. 1816; *Maidstone J.*, 23 Apr. 1816 (Maidstone scheme); CKS, P40/8/1, Boxley vestry minute, 1 May 1816; ESRO, PAR467/12/1/2, Rye vestry minute, 4 Dec. 1816.



MAP 1. Location of parish farms in southern England, 1793–1832.

Source: Gill Alexander/Carl Griffin. For sources see appendix.

social policy importance. The accounts for the 499-acre parish farm at Cranbrook, hired at a rental of £448 a year, were 'so blended together' with the 'general expenses' of the parish as to make the profit, or loss, of the operation impossible to discern. As noted above, it was thought that the annual saving to the poor rates was £1,850 a year. Much of this profit came from the 23-acres of hop gardens, which were 'attended with great expense' and were occasionally 'extremely unproductive'. Notwithstanding the inherent risks, in the first six years of operation the farm had generated enough money to pay off the sums borrowed for its establishment. 'At a time when so many farms are ... unoccupied in several parts of the kingdom', reckoned the editor, 'and when such numbers of industrious labourers also complain that they can find no work, it is [a policy] well worth consideration'.⁵⁴

The cultivation of hops, so Sinclair reckoned, was not essential to the parish farm system, which could be successfully operated on the basis of arable cultivation alone. Instead, post-1815, the ready number of unoccupied farms, low rents and 'moderate' stocking costs would allow the system to be established beyond the immediate area.⁵⁵ Early adopting parishes, so the archive would suggest, were indeed much more modest in their approach compared to Cranbrook. That two of the most ambitious schemes – at Rye (1816) and Staplehurst (1817) – occurred in the vicinity of the pre-existing parish farms suggests a confidence born out of direct knowledge of the successes of the Benenden and Cranbrook farms.⁵⁶ Most early schemes though, instead of hiring already productive land, sought to enclose, clear and cultivate commons and wastes. Typically, only small areas were so taken over by the parish: 'some waste' at Boxley; 'part' of the waste at Westerham; eight acres on Barming Heath; the same amount on Leybrook Common in Ringwood; and ten acres of Titchfield Common.⁵⁷

The adoption of parish farms beyond the Weald suggests a range of influences beyond the two early Wealden farms, most probably Board of Agriculture-generated support in the 1790s for the cultivation of wastes. As had been the case during the grain crises that decade, the provincial press proved eager advocates of waste cultivation.⁵⁹ The *Reading Mercury* even went as far as to state that the government ought to be able to offer grants to employ those out of work in enclosure and cultivation of 'unproductive lands', whilst, as noted, the *Maidstone Journal* favourably reported in April 1816 on a scheme to enclose 15 acres of Barming Heath to employ the Maidstone poor.⁶⁰ The uptake of these schemes though was dependent on three

⁵⁴ *Kentish Gazette*, 27 and 31 Dec. 1816. Whilst the Cranbrook vestry could have paid off the farm's borrowings in January 1801, they instead used the money to relieve the poor 'until the next assessment'. CKS, P100/8/2, Cranbrook vestry minutes, 11 Apr. 1794 and 6 Jan. 1801.

⁵⁵ *Kentish Gazette*, 27 and 31 Dec. 1816.

⁵⁶ ESRO, PAR467/12/1/2, Rye vestry minute, 4 Dec. 1816; CKS, P347/8/1, Staplehurst vestry minute, 15 Oct. 1817.

⁵⁷ CKS, P40/8/1, Boxley vestry minute, 1 May 1816; CKS, P389/8/1, Westerham vestry minute, 16 May 1817; *Maidstone J.*, 23 Apr. 1816; HRO, 95M95 PV2, Ringwood vestry minute, 13 Jan. and 2 Mar. 1817; HRO, 37M73 PV1,

Titchfield vestry minute, 1 Apr. 1817.

⁵⁹ The Kent Agricultural Society, for instance, readily adopted this as policy, recommending the move to members as being 'of the highest public utility', the pronouncement duly being publicised in the *Kentish press: Maidstone J.*, 12 Jan. 1796; *Kentish Gazette*, 19 Feb. 1796.

⁶⁰ *Reading Mercury*, 28 Apr. 1817; *Maidstone J.*, 23 Apr. 1816. Intriguingly, less than a month after the *Reading Mercury* report Reading St. Lawrence vestry resolved to hire 2½ acres of land adjacent to the workhouse on which to employ the poor: BRO, D/P 97/8/3, Reading St. Lawrence vestry minute, 20 May 1817.

factors. First, the parish had still to contain wastes, thus such schemes were more possible in upland parishes than low-lying arable districts. Second, such plans were necessarily reliant on the approval of the Lord of the Manor. If the Lord was also a resident farmer, then the promise of using wastes to lower the poor rates would be favourably received, representing both a direct saving and also the possibility of charging higher rents to tenants.⁶¹ Third, the cost of enclosing and bringing into cultivation wastes meant that as cereal and land prices declined, such schemes were no longer (relatively) as cost-effective as renting previously cultivated land. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, I have found no references after 1819 of vestries undertaking the cultivation of wastes.⁶² Parish farms created from wastes were never actually given statutory support. Indeed, it was not until the 1831 'Inclosures of Waste Act' that enclosing wastes to employ the poor was legally supported, albeit in the form of up to 50 acres of allotments rather than a parish farm.⁶³

V

That many rural vestries decided to utilize the poor rates for the foundation of parish farms, even before they were sanctioned by law in 1819, suggests that they were neither obscure or novel. On the passing of the Act, a slew of further vestries adopted parish farming, some clearly inspired by the Act's provisions. For instance, at Westbourne on the West Sussex-Hampshire border the vestry resolved on 28 May 1819 that land of 'no more than twenty acres' be hired to employ the poor upon, evidently an instance of a parish clearly wanting to stick to the letter of the law.⁶⁴ Westbourne was not alone. Kingston (Kent), Boldre, Fawley, Romsey and Steep (all Hampshire) also established parish farms for the first time in the months following the passing of the Act.⁶⁵ Burchardt's claim (though understandable given the disparate nature of the archive) that the clauses in the second Sturges Bourne Act were 'little noticed at the time, and were evidently rarely acted on', requires some revision.⁶⁶

⁶¹ The level of poor rates was a major factor in determining farm rents. As Broad has shown in relation to Buckinghamshire, major landowners had a great incentive to intervene in parish governance: to attempt to effect a reduction in poor rates so that they could increase their rents: 'Parish economies of welfare', p. 995.

⁶² The scheme adopted by the combined parishes of Salisbury may offer an exception to this rule, though the report in the *Hampshire Telegraph* (17 Jun. 1822) is a little ambiguous. The downlands 'which command a view of Salisbury' were now cultivated by the Guardians of the Poor 'employing on it, or some other beneficial work, every able-bodied pauper' in preparing the ground for vegetables, thus suggesting that the ground was either previously uncultivated or had fallen out of cultivation in recent years. Interestingly, those so employed were allowed four times the relief of others who refused to labour for

their money. The scheme had also run at 'no expense to the City'.

⁶³ 1 and 2 William IV (1831) c.42 and c.59 also allowed for, with Treasury approval, up to 50 acres of crown land to be so enclosed. See also J. Burchardt, 'Land, labour, and politics: parliament and allotment provision, 1830-1870', in J. Wordie (ed.), *Agriculture and politics in England, 1815-1939* (2000), p. 104.

⁶⁴ On 28 Dec. it was also resolved to appoint a supervisor for the new parish farm: West Sussex Record Office (WSRO), PAR206/9/1, Westbourne vestry Minutes, 28 May and 28 Dec. 1819.

⁶⁵ Canterbury Cathedral Archives, U3/168/12/A1, Kingston vestry minute, 29 Oct. 1819; HRO, 10M58 PV2, Romsey vestry minute, 15 Apr. 1819; HRO, 84M70 PO2, Boldre vestry minute, 30 Sept. and 9 Dec. 1819; HRO, 74M80 PV1, Steep vestry minute, 20 Dec. 1819; HRO, 25M60 PV1, Fawley vestry minute, 13 Apr. 1820.

⁶⁶ Burchardt, 'Land, labour, and politics', p. 100.

Parish farms continued to be an important rural social policy in the 1820s. From the start of 1821 to the end of 1830, the extant archive details the establishment of at least a further 24 parish farms with a further seven farms – for which we have no precise founding date – formed by the spring of 1832. The geography essentially remained the same (see Map 1). The Weald, stretching down to the Romney Marsh and its fringe, remained the heartland of parish farming, though significant clusters of parishes existed around the New Forest and in south Hampshire. There was, however, something of an extension in the 1820s, with parish farms also being established in Berkshire – at Abingdon (1822), Hungerford and Wokingham (1824) and Bucklebury (1828) – and farms at Corsham (1825), Lacock (1829) and Bradford upon Avon (1830) joining the previously sole Wiltshire farm at Calne (1817).⁶⁷

Outside of the High Weald where a significant proportion of vestries practised parochial farming – this concentration being a function of the initial local example, the ready availability of small farms, and the peculiarly deep nature of the rural depression in the Weald – parish farms were also frequently adopted by market town vestries. Whilst the exact reason for this pattern is unclear, some points are worth speculating upon. The wider community of small ratepayers in market parishes would offer a more powerful resistance to farmer-benefiting roundsmen schemes than in purely agricultural parishes. The cost per ratepayer of establishing a parish farm would also be considerably lower for such parishes than less populous, entirely agrarian parishes, though, as noted, most such farms were small.

In terms of size, most of the new farms established in this period were less than 20 acres, though the Woodchurch (Kent) farm, established in 1821 at an annual rent of £130 and with an annual income of £1,805 for 1822, suggests a far higher acreage.⁶⁸ The 20-acre stipulation in the second Sturges Bourne Act was clearly a factor, as was cost. In practice, parishes paid little heed to the formal stipulations of the statute in relation to farm size. As the Appendix shows, the size of parish farms varied from the 499 acres at Cranbrook to a solitary acre at Cookham. In fact, it is impossible to discover the size of many parish farms, including those only known from the parliamentary papers, but it would appear that the average parish farm was of about 20 acres, similar to the average allotment site in the period. Perhaps more pertinent though was the fact that most such establishments complemented other employment schemes. Small farms were useful in that they enabled the ‘residual’ unemployed to be constantly engaged, whilst other schemes, most notably road working, could cope with both year-on-year and seasonal variations in unemployment levels. In this sense, whilst many parish farms operated on a scale similar to allotment sites, they fulfilled a very different function in the polity of the parish.

The case of Twyford (Hampshire) is instructive. At a meeting on 22 March 1821, the vestry agreed to a major shift in parish policy: an association was formed to protect property and detect offenders; an assistant overseer was appointed; and a committee was established to

⁶⁷ BRO, D/P 1/8/1, Abingdon St. Helen's vestry minutes, 23 Jan. and 24 July 1822; BRO, D/P 71/8/4, Hungerford vestry minute, 8 Sept. 1824; BRO, D/P 154/8/1, Wokingham vestry minute, 6 Apr. 1824; BCRO, D/P 28/8/1, Bucklebury vestry minute, 26 Dec. 1828; WSHC,

1812/9, Corsham vestry minute, 16 Sept. 1825; WSHC, 173/3, Lacock vestry minute, 18 Nov. 1829; WSHC, 77/18, Bradford on Avon vestry minute, 1 Feb. 1830.

⁶⁸ CKS, P400/12/2, Woodchurch parish farm accounts, 1821–36.

‘employ the parish funds’ to purchase any raw materials ‘which may be thought necessary to employ the poor in work’. All other unemployed individuals were to work on the roads. The policy was refined a fortnight later. The assistant overseer was now not only to employ the poor on the roads but also in cultivating ‘any land the parish may hire’. The ‘Visiting Committee’ were also to provide ‘a quantity of silk from Winchester ... to employ the poor in winding’, with other women and children engaged in other work as deemed ‘proper’ by the Committee. Further revisions were soon deemed necessary, due to the problem of work discipline amongst the parish labourers: all the ‘idle and refractory young men’ were to join the ‘aged and impotent men’ in the House of Industry at Winchester.⁶⁹

VI

Given the geographically uneven uptake of parish farming beyond the Weald, it is fair to assert that such farms were not a universal panacea for high poor rates and rural unemployment. As with all other attempts to ‘solve’ these problems by setting the jobless to work, the biggest problems were vestry support and cost. Notwithstanding the paucity of detail in the archival record relating to the agricultural practices of parish farms, the emphasis on spade cultivation suggests that most parish farms were used for cereal production and, in the case of farms established in parishes with large pre-existing workhouses, vegetables. Low cereal prices post-1815 therefore meant that, as with ‘private’ farms, it was difficult to cover costs, though not having to pay poor rates certainly gave parish farms an advantage. Occasionally the archive reveals a case where a parish considered establishing a farm but decided against it – as at Speldhurst (Kent) in September 1830 – or where it was agreed to give up the parish farm – as at Charing in 1825 and neighbouring Egerton (both Kent) in 1828.⁷⁰ Cost was certainly decisive at Ticehurst (Sussex) when in June 1822 it was resolved to give up the ‘parish wood’ after a failed attempt to reduce the rent.⁷¹

Clearly, there were significant barriers to success. For all but the largest farms where parishes had made considerable investments, or in cases where long-term leases had been taken out, the unstable parochial unemployment policy landscape of the time meant that small parish farms were unlikely to be persisted with by vestries if losses were made. The farm would be wound up, the effects sold, and another policy adopted. Indeed, given the time, and attendant costs, necessary for effective supervision, it meant they were particularly susceptible to being abandoned for a lower cost alternative. Farms that were not effectively supervised, such as that, according to the 1834 Poor Law Report, on the Isle of Wight, were inefficient and those so employed reportedly lacking work discipline. The parish farm at Hambledon (Hampshire) reportedly even had ‘shamefully corrupted’ the ‘morals’ of the labourers. The farm had become

⁶⁹ HRO, 21M83 PV2, Twyford vestry minutes, 22 Mar., 5 Apr. and 24 May 1821.

⁷⁰ CKS, P344/8/2, Speldhurst vestry minute, 12 Sept. 1830; CKS, P78/8/6, Charing vestry minute, 22 Sept. 1825; CKS, P78B/8/3, Egerton vestry minute, 8 Feb. 1828.

⁷¹ ESRO, PAR 492/12/1/4, Ticehurst Select vestry minute, 6 Jun. 1822. A less sober judgement was made

ten years later in response to the ‘Rural Queries’ of the Commission on the Poor Laws. The farm, so Courthope reckoned, had been ‘found to be attended with many evil consequences’ and duly abandoned in favour of ‘billeting’ those out of work on the farmers. What the ‘evil consequences’ were was not disclosed. BPP, 1834, XLIV, p. 4323.

a 'school of idleness', and in the words of overseer William Harrison, 'a disgrace' that had led to the formation of working gangs upon whom 'hardly a respectable person could pass them in the parish without their making some observation upon them'.⁷² Both farms were central to protest mobilizations: the Isle of Wight farm labourers at least twice during Swing, the Hambledon farm workers, in the afterglow of Swing in late 1831 and early 1832 and also against the imposition of the New Poor Law.⁷³

In the vast majority of cases the archive does not detail how the farms were managed. There are, however, some exceptions. The Cranbrook farm was managed by a bailiff 'under the direction of a committee of the neighbouring gentlemen'. At Ash-next-Sandwich (Kent), the poor were simply 'set to work' on the farm by the overseer, whilst the farm at Margate (Kent) was reported to be under 'immediate superintendence' by the 'able management of the guardians and governor', the parish being operated under Gilbert's Act.⁷⁴ The longevity of the farms at Cranbrook and Margate, as well as others elsewhere, attests to the fact that large, well-run parish farms could convince vestries to continue their support. Indeed, Cranbrook managed to keep their parish farm until 1855 when the Poor Law Board finally won a long battle to force the vestry to abandon the farm. After liabilities had been discharged, the parish was left with a balance of over £3,000.⁷⁵

Beyond (rarely recorded) vestry judgements and the loaded, ideologically driven critiques of the 1834 Poor Law Report, analyses of the effects of parish farms necessarily rest upon two interrelated factors: their profitability and impact upon the poor rates, and their effect on unemployment. Judging the success of parish farms in terms of profit or loss though is fraught with complication. For most parish farms there is no financial record of their operation. Some were only accounted for in general overseers' account books, whilst a small minority were recorded in (notionally) separate accounts. When surveying Hampshire parishes in 1834 prior to forming New Poor Law unions, Assistant Poor Law Commissioner A'Court found the issue almost impossible to assess. At Mottisfont the '16 to 18 able bodied men on the parish books' were employed both on the three-acre parish farm in spade husbandry and also upon the roads, thus making it impossible to ascertain the cost of their labour to the farm. The 70-acre farm at Eling was also cultivated by spade husbandry by 'the paupers'. Those with small families were put to work for only four or five days in the week, whilst those with large families had to work 'the full six days' to gain their full maintenance. Their work was remunerated half in bread and half in cash. The accounts in this large, well-run parish were, according to A'Court, very regular. 'Nothing', he claimed, 'can appear more regular'. And yet, upon investigation, the stated profit of £46 15s. 8d. in the year ending at Lady Day 1834 did not

⁷² BPP, 1834, XLIV, pp. 26–7; BPP, 1837, XVII 'Third report from Select Committee on the Poor Law Amendment Act', p. 26.

⁷³ Isle of Wight: *Southampton Mercury*, 20 Nov. 1830; *Portsmouth, Portsea and Gosport Herald*, 28 Nov. 1830; *Hampshire Chronicle*, 29 Nov. 1830. For an analysis of this incident see: C. Griffin, *The rural war: Captain Swing and the politics of protest* (forthcoming), ch. 4. Hambledon: C. Griffin, 'Swing, Swing redivivus and

something after Swing? On the death throes of a protest movement, December 1830–December 1833', *International Rev. of Social Hist.* 54 (2009), pp. 492–3. BPP, 1837, XVII, p. 30.

⁷⁴ BPP, 1817, VI, pp. 164–5; BPP, 1834, XLIV, p. 498; Labourers' Friend Society, *The labourer's friend*, p. 246. Margate parish was run under Gilbert's Act.

⁷⁵ Webbs, *The Old Poor Law*, p. 228.

allow for labour. This appeared to amount to 'nearly £400' resulting in a loss to the parish of 'very little short of £358'.⁷⁶

Such analyses are hardly surprising for the Poor Law Commission was ideologically predisposed to find fault with parish farms. Indeed, whilst it is easy to criticize the accounting methods discovered by A'Court, he failed to appreciate that parish farm employees would need to be relieved anyway. Besides, was being employed rather than being relieved in 'idleness' not in keeping with the ethos of the New Poor Law? Whether the cost of 'pauper' labour should be included when assessing profitability was perhaps a moot point, but any assessment of 'profitability' of parish farms as commercial enterprises is necessarily dependent upon the rate of wages paid to those employed on the farm.

Again, precise information is hard to find, but there are a few examples. At Woodchurch on the fringe of the high-wage Romney Marsh, labourers during the early summer of 1830 were being paid 2s. 6d. a day, in line with the local norm. In early 1832, wages paid on parish farms at Ash-next-Sandwich (2s. 0d. a day) and Shipley (Sussex: from 5s. 5d. per week for single men to 10s. 5d. for married labourers with two children) were also in line with local norms. At Eastbourne though, labourers with large families could earn up to 16s. 0d. per week, whereas the standard local wage was 12s. 0d. before parish allowances. Wages on the Brenchley (Kent) parish farm were reportedly also high enough to prevent two labourers so employed taking alternative – and independent from the parish – work offered them 2s. 6d. a day in a local wood. This case, reported in the 1834 Poor Law Report, might be apocryphal, a semi-fictional story mobilized in support of the Commission's belief that labourers preferred 'lingering on the parish farms, and trusting to the pay they can wring from the parish' than working independently. Some vestries did, however, use parish farms as deterrents. For instance, the able-bodied male relief applicants at Poole (Dorset) sent to work on its farm soon found themselves alternative employment, whilst at the 'model' reforming parish of Cookham (Berkshire), Newman noted those employed on the farm received 'the lowest wages in the parish'.⁷⁷

Perhaps the most transparent account comes from Woodchurch where separate parish farm accounts, which included both rent and labour costs, were kept. In the first year of full operation – ending 22 February 1823 – the farm made a loss of £7 17s. 7½d. on revenues of £1,805 0s. 11½d. Thereafter, the farm went from generating either small losses – the greatest being £36 13s. 0d. for the year ending Michaelmas 1825 – or small profits, until the year ending Michaelmas 1832 after which the farm consistently turned a profit. The greatest profit was £83 8s. 5¾d., made in the year ending Michaelmas 1834. Even so, in so large and populous a parish, the farm made only a small impact upon the level of poor rates.⁷⁸ At Cranbrook, as noted, the farm did lower the poor rates. Between 1815 and 1820 alone, it paid some £1,192 in profits to the general parish account, whilst by 1832 it was reckoned that on average £165 a year accrued to the parish from the farm. The net impact on poor rates was calculated in 1817 at a saving to

⁷⁶ TNA, MH 32/1, Correspondence of Assistant Poor Law Commissioner A'Court.

⁷⁷ CKS, P400/12/2, Woodchurch parish farm accounts, 1821–36; BPP, 1834, XLIV, pp. 26–7, 295–6,

498, 830 and 1159; Neuman, *Speenhamland county*, p. 189.

⁷⁸ CKS, P400/12/2, Woodchurch parish farm accounts, 1821–36.

the ratepayers of £1,650 a year, this figure taking into account the profit of the farm and the fact that labour was now supported by the farm rather than the rates.⁷⁹

Notions of profitability are therefore loaded, for not all parish farms operated on equal terms – or on a level footing with commercial farms – in relation to wages paid or the costs of superintendence. Besides, to make such a simple calculation would be to ignore the many unquantifiable benefits that some commentators attached to well-run parish farms: cultivating otherwise fallow or waste land; the skills learnt by young lads and girls so employed; and, perhaps most importantly, keeping labourers at meaningful agricultural work rather degrading work on the roads or in gravel pits.

Another important factor determining their feasibility was the size of the risk that the parish was willing to take, and the number of individuals who needed employment. The viability of parish farms was also dependent upon local landowners being prepared to let land to the parish rather than to farmers, although post-1815 there was often no real competition. Frustratingly, the archive is slight in relation to the impulses of lessors. There are, however, exceptions. At Cranbrook, the farm was taken at the ‘reduced rent’ of £302 (as of 1832) from Lord Cornwallis, whilst the annual rent of £80 paid to landlord Blount for the 300-acre farm at Shipley was clearly well below market rates even in a depressed year like 1832.⁸⁰ Of arguably even greater importance in determining the success of parish farms though was the willingness of the vestry to administer the scheme consistently. Given that most adopting parishes deployed parish farms in tandem with other employment strategies and only ever farmed in a modest way, this will was often decidedly weak.

VII

Were parish farms a solution to the problem of rural unemployment in the post-Napoleonic years? That so many parishes, especially in the Weald and market towns, chose to follow the lead of Cranbrook suggests a belief amongst parochial administrators that they were at least a partial solution, or rather had a positive ameliorative effect. That the evidence presented to the 1817 Poor Law Committee directly led to the passage of a law supporting their adoption is also proof that, at least for a while, poor law reformers and parliament were also convinced by their potential. Somewhat contradictorily, even the Poor Law Commission, in a list of ‘the most eligible modes of providing out-door employment for able-bodied paupers’ to be employed in anticipation of the establishment of ‘an efficient workhouse’, noted the popularity of parish farming by spade husbandry as an alternative to ‘the evils attendant on the employment of paupers on the roads’. This is perhaps a reflection that the favoured parish of Cookham rented an acre of ‘barren ground’ on which the able-bodied claiming relief were ‘compelled’ to dig for, as noted, ‘the lowest wages in the parish’.⁸¹

⁷⁹ CKS, P100/8/5, Cranbrook parish farm committee minutes, 1830–57; BPP, 1817, VI, pp. 163–5.

⁸⁰ BPP, 1834, XLIV, pp. 489–90, 830.

⁸¹ BPP, 1837, XVII, ‘Second report from Select

Committee on the Poor Law Amendment Act’, p. 53; BPP, 1834, XLIV, p. 25; Neuman, *Speenhamland county*, p. 189.

This advice followed that issued by Assistant Poor Law Commissioner Hawley to Chailey parish in November 1834 prior to the formation of a local poor law union. Here the workhouse was 'under used', so, Hawley recommended, those currently employed on the roads should be 'offered the house' and then set to work 'on some land which they have near the house'. In forming what would become the Uckfield Union, Hawley also suggested that if a workhouse was created at Maresfield, 13 acres of 'ancient enclosures' and 'any amount of [contiguous] waste' in Ashdown Forest could similarly be used 'for the purpose of outdoor employment'.⁸² Parish farms could, at least in the minds of the Poor Law Commission, act as quasi-'workhouse tests'. Yet to claim that parish farms were universally successful would be far from the mark. That many parishes abandoned parish farms after a short period of experimentation is testament to the fact that they did not always deliver the outcomes vestries had desired. Indeed, poorly run and ill-supervised parish farms could be inefficient and have, at least according to A'Court, a deleterious impact upon the work discipline of those so employed.

Clearly there was little future for parish farming under the auspices of the New Poor Law. That the Cranbrook farm survived was in large part a function of the fact that it was technically administered by a group of trustees on behalf of the parish rather than directly by the parish itself. The dramatic post-1830 rise in the provision of allotments was also of some importance in parish farming's demise. Paternalistically-minded landlords, and vestries, by providing allotments, were able to circumvent the policies of the Poor Law Commission in offering *de facto* relief to the poor. Allotments were not though a 'solution' to rural unemployment, something the Labourers' Friend Society itself acknowledged in 1833 when, as noted earlier, it published a letter detailing the positive effects of the Margate farm.⁸³

The adoption and role of parish farms perfectly illustrates the complexity of parochial administration under the old poor laws, a makeshift that formed part of a policy patchwork framed by the statute and local experiment. They were also emblematic of poor law administration before the imposition of the New Poor Law in that, as with all policy expedients of the time, they were no panacea. If parish farms did not solve the problem of rural unemployment or even offer a universally applicable (though partial) palliative, they did work for some parishes at some points in time. That parish farming filled a niche role in the response to unemployment cannot be denied, but in the dying days of the Old Poor Law it was a well-known and far from novel response to intractable difficulties.

⁸² TNA, MH 32/1, fos 23 and 68–71, Assistant Poor Law Commissioner A'Court to the Poor Law Commission, 20 Nov. and 31 Dec. 1834.

⁸³ Labourers' Friend Society, *The labourer's friend*, pp. 244–6.

APPENDIX: Size of parish farms^a (at greatest extent), 1793 – Spring 1832

<i>Parish</i>	<i>County</i>	<i>Size (at greatest extent/if known)</i>	<i>Reference (first known)</i>
Cranbrook	Kent	499 acres	CKS, P100/8/2, Cranbrook Vestry Minute, 11 Apr. 1794
Shipley	Sussex	'near' 300 acres	BPP, 1834, XLIV, p. 830
Rye ^b	Sussex	100–150 acres	ESRO, PAR467/12/1/2, Rye Vestry Minute, 4 Dec. 1816
Hellingley	Sussex	94 acres	ESRO, PAR375/12/4, Hellingly Vestry Minute, 10 Sept. 1821
Benenden	Kent	86 acres	BPP, 1817, VI, pp. 163–5
Woodchurch	Kent	Rent of £130 p.a. (1823)	CKS, P400/12/2, Woodchurch parish farm accounts, 1821–36
Staplehurst	Kent	Rent of £100 p.a. (1823)	CKS, P347/8/1, Staplehurst Vestry Minute, 15 Oct. 1817
Wye	Kent	72 acres	BPP, 1834, XLIV, pp. 492–3
Eling	Hampshire	70 acres	HRO, 4M69 PV1, Eling Vestry Minute, 10 Sept. 1829
Margate	Kent	62 acres	BPP, 1834, XLIV, pp. 445
Hambledon	Hampshire	'about' 50 acres	BPP, 1837, XVII, p. 26
Titchfield	Hampshire	50 acres	HRO, 37M73 PV1, Titchfield Vestry Minute, 1 Apr. 1817
Ash-next-Sandwich	Kent	40 acres	BPP, 1834, XLIV, p. 498
Battle	Sussex	'farm'	ESRO, PAR236/12/1/2, Battle Vestry Minute, 26 Apr. 1824
Goudhurst	Kent	'Glassenbury Farm'	CKS, P157/8/1, Goudhurst Vestry Minute, 24 Apr. 1822
Mayfield	Sussex	'farm'	ESRO, PAR422/12/1, Mayfield Vestry Minute, 27 Oct. 1820
Aldington	Kent	'parish farm'	CKS, P4/8/3, Aldington Vestry Minute, 6 Apr. 1830
Appledore	Kent	'parish farm'	CKS, P7/8/1, Appledore Vestry Minute, 2 Aug. 1830
Mersham	Kent	'a farm'	CKS P248/8/1, Mersham Vestry Minute, 11 Feb. 1829
High Halden	Kent	'parish farm'	CKS, P164/8/2, High Halden Vestry Minute, 31 Mar. 1821
Boughton Malherbe	Kent	Rent of £40 p.a. (1830)	CKS, P38/8/1, Boughton Malherbe Vestry Minute, 1 Oct. 1830.
Lacock	Wiltshire	25 acres	WSHC, 173/3, Lacock Vestry Minute, 18 Nov. 1829
Bradford-upon-Avon	Wiltshire	20 acres	WSHC, 77/18, Bradford-upon-Avon Vestry Minute, 1 Feb. 1830

<i>Parish</i>	<i>County</i>	<i>Size (at greatest extent/if known)</i>	<i>Reference (first known)</i>
Westbourne	Sussex	'no more than 20 acres'	WSRO, PAR206/9/1, Westbourne Vestry Minute, 28 May 1819
Maidstone	Kent	15 acres	<i>Maidstone J.</i> , 23 April 1816
Abingdon	Berkshire	12 acres	BRO, D/P 1 8/1, Abingdon St. Helens Vestry Minute, 23 Jan. 1822
Droxford	Hampshire	10 acres	HRO, 66M76 PV3, Droxford Vestry Minute, 21 Nov. 1818
Thatcham	Berkshire	10 acres	Newman, <i>Speenhamland county</i> , p. 189
Bucklebury	Berkshire	6 acres	BRO, D/P 28/8/1, Bucklebury Vestry Minute, 26 Dec. 1828
Calne	Wiltshire	6 acres (at least)	WSHC, 2238/23, Calne Vestry Minute, 19 Dec. 1817
Lydd	Kent	5 acres	CKS, P237/8/1, Lydd Vestry Minute, 8 Oct. 1821
Mottisfont	Hampshire	3 acres	TNA, MH 32/1
Reading St. Lawrence	Berkshire	2.5 acres	BRO, D/P 97/8/3, Reading St. Lawrence Vestry Minute, 20 May 1817
Eastbourne	Sussex	2 acres	ESRO, DE/A1/3, Eastbourne Vestry Minute, 5 Nov. 1827
Corsham	Wiltshire	'a few acres'	WSHC, 1812/9, Corsham Vestry Minute, 16 Sept. 1825
Eling	Hampshire	'a few acres'	HRO, 4M69 PV1, Eling Vestry Minute, 29 Oct. 1829
Cookham	Berkshire	1 acre	Newman, <i>Speenhamland county</i> , p. 189
Amport	Hampshire	'Sarson land'	HRO, 43M67/PV2, Amport Vestry Minute, 15 Nov. 1820
Hartfield	Sussex	'part of the forest'	ESRO, PAR360/10/2/1, Hartfield Vestry Minute, 23 Sept. 1821
Ticehurst	Sussex	'wood'	ESRO, PAR 492/12/1/4, Ticehurst Select Vestry Minute, 6 Jun. 1822
Boxley	Kent	'some waste'	CKS, P40/8/1, Boxley Vestry Minute, 1 May 1816
Westerham	Kent	'waste'	CKS, P389/8/1, Westerham Vestry Minute, 16 May 1817
Ringwood	Hampshire	'waste'	HRO, 95M95 PV2, Ringwood Vestry Minute, 13 Jan. 1817
Steep	Hampshire	'waste land'	HRO, 74M80/PV1, Steep Vestry Minute, 20 Dec. 1819
Fawley	Hampshire	'parish allotments'	HRO, 25M60 PV1, Fawley Vestry Minute, 13 apr. 1820
Bishopstoke	Hampshire	'piece of land'	HRO, 145M82 PV1, Bishopstoke Vestry Minute, 4 May 1829

<i>Parish</i>	<i>County</i>	<i>Size (at greatest extent/if known)</i>	<i>Reference (first known)</i>
Boldre	Hampshire	‘land’	HRO, 84M70 PO2, Boldre vestry Minute, 30 Sept. 1819
Romsey	Hampshire	‘land’	HRO, 10M58 PV2, Romsey Vestry Minute, 15 Apr. 1819
Twyford	Hampshire	‘land’	HRO, 21M83 PV2, Twyford Vestry Minute, 5 Apr. 1821
Hungerford	Berkshire	‘piece of land’	BRO, D/P 71/8/4, Hungerford Vestry Minute, 8 Sept. 1824
Chartham	Kent	‘field’	CCA, U3/54/12/1, Chartham Select Vestry Minute, 13 Jul. 1829
Kingston	Kent	‘land’	CCA, U3/168/12/A1, Kingston Vestry Minute, 29 Oct. 1819
New Romney	Kent	‘field’	CKS, P309/8/8, New Romney Vestry Minute, 3 Dec. 1815
East Hoathly	Sussex	‘field’	ESRO, PAR378/12/3, East Hoathly Vestry Minute, 28 Feb. 1816
Biddenden	Kent	Unclear	CKS, P26/12/10, Biddenden Parish Farm Accounts, 1 Mar. 1826
Wokingham	Berkshire	Unclear	BRO, D/P 154/8/1, Wokingham Vestry minute, 6 Apr. 1824

^a see Map 1 for the location of these parish farms.

^b This was a very short-lived scheme, the old barracks at the centre of the scheme soon being sold off: ESRO, PAR467/12/1/2, various vestry minutes 1816 and 1817.