

Agricultural adjustment on the Berkshire Downs during the recession of 1921–38*

by R. B. Tranter

Abstract

Following a review of the policy and market background facing agriculture in England and Wales during 1921–38, the changes in the make-up of the industry and its financial performance are detailed. Then, the position of farming on the Berkshire Downs is discussed and various case-studies presented to show how farmers adjusted to the agricultural recession. Finally, it is shown that farmers there were much harder hit by the recession than their counterparts across the country because of the thin, poor chalk soils and a lack of moisture and nutrients, despite their strenuous efforts to adjust through changing land uses and diversifying into new enterprises.

Whilst agricultural historians still disagree about the detail of cause and effect, it is undeniable that following the advent of a *laissez-faire* agricultural policy in 1921, British agriculture went into serious recession until 1938. This was despite the re-introduction of guaranteed prices in the early 1930s and the creation of Marketing Boards for a range of farm products which did a little to stem the effects of cheap foreign food and feed imports. Perhaps not surprisingly, historians and agricultural economists disagree about the severity of the recession and whether it provided opportunities for revival for British farmers.¹

Agricultural economists have devoted considerable effort to analysing how farmers adjust to changing market and policy pressures. For example, Tony Giles, an eminent farm management expert, devised a framework explaining how farmers can seek to maintain or increase profit in

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¹ This summary of the policy and market background is drawn from the treatments provided by: E. F. Nash, 'Changes in external factors affecting British agriculture', in G. McCrone and E. A. Attwood (eds), *Agricultural policy in Britain* (1965), pp. 31–45; A. F. McCalla 'Protectionism in international agricultural trade, 1850–1968', *Agricultural Hist.* 43 (1969), pp. 329–44; E. H. Whetham, *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, VIII, 1914–1939 (1978); M. Tracy, *Government and agriculture in western Europe, 1880–1988* (1989), pp. 147–62; M. J. Smith, *The politics of agricultural support in Britain* (1990), pp. 57–86; R. Perren, *Agriculture in depression, 1870–1940* (1995); and P. Brassley, 'British farming between the wars', in P. Brassley, J. Burchardt and L. Thompson (eds), *The English countryside between the wars* (2006), pp. 187–99.

one or more of four ways: first, by increasing gross margins from existing enterprises; second, by reducing fixed costs such as labour or machinery per unit area; third, by modifying systems towards intensifying production; and, fourth, by diversifying into new or off-farm enterprises, or taking up off-farm employment.²

John McNerney, a leading agricultural economist, has described agricultural adjustment since the 1970s as 'groping, coping and hoping'. Although that is long after the period examined here, his points are still pertinent. They can be summarized as farmers 'groping' to find the path ahead in an uncertain future, 'coping' by rewarding themselves by taking less wages, making capital resources last longer, reducing regular labour either completely or by cutting their hours, and 'hoping' and machinating through their Members of Parliament and farming unions and other pressure groups for the introduction of more protectionism for agriculture.³ Such adjustment was typical during 1921–38 as will appear when we discuss changes in agriculture in both England and Wales and in more detail for the Berkshire Downs.

Following a review of inter-war agriculture in the first and second sections, we outline the Berkshire Downs (Section III), compare the land price data for the country as a whole with that for the Berkshire Downs (Section IV) and then, following an outline of farming systems on the Berkshire Downs and changes in cropping and stocking and labour use over the study period, the financial performance of several case-study farms is discussed. Next, in Section VI, conclusions are drawn as to how farming on the Berkshire Downs fared compared with the rest of the country. In the following section (VII), possible evidence of dereliction is also presented. A conclusion follows in Section VIII where an assessment of whether the Berkshire Downs was worse hit by the recession than the country as a whole in terms of financial performance is made.

Before proceeding with the main thrust of the paper, it is necessary to ask why studying agricultural adjustment on the Berkshire Downs over the period is worthwhile. It can be argued that the case is clear for the accepted view is that two types of farming were especially hard hit: arable farming on heavy and difficult to work clay soils (such as Essex and Huntingdon) and hill farming (in upland Britain) where output was limited by climate, altitude and poor soil as well as lessening demand for wether mutton and beef from older cattle.⁴

Farming on the Berkshire Downs was hit at the same time in both the ways that these areas were – falling arable product prices and falling demand for their specific livestock products. In addition, on the downs, lack of soil moisture was always a limiting factor for both arable and livestock farming. As such this might go against the conventional wisdom that regards the downlands of southern England as a relatively prosperous farming region at that time. It should also be mentioned that the agricultural recession of the 1870s has been much more widely studied than that of the 1920s and 1930s and, for the latter period, few regional studies such as that presented here have been carried out.

² A. K. Giles, 'No fixed address – Presidential address', *J. Agricultural Economics* 38 (1987), pp. 383 and 390.

agriculture: groping, coping and hoping (2005), pp. 3, 11 and 15.

³ J. P. McNerney, *Economic adjustment in*

⁴ E. H. Whetham, *British Farming, 1939–49* (1952), pp. 7–8.

I

The trigger which brought about prolonged recession was the sudden repeal of the Agriculture Act, 1920 (the so-called 'Great Betrayal'). The act had promised four years of guaranteed prices for wheat and oats. On the basis of this perceived security, many tenants bought their farms from their landlords. The government felt forced to repeal the act as world prices fell dramatically after the War, leading to a growing deficiency payments bill for the Treasury. As farmers faced the fall in prices for their products, Britain became a dumping ground for food. By 1925, 27 per cent of world wheat exports were imported into Britain and 20 per cent of the feed grains; in 1913 the equivalent figures were 20 per cent and 16 per cent respectively.⁵ Imports of meat, butter and cheese also rose substantially. Despite farmers' clamour for assistance, successive governments stood fast with their *laissez-faire* policies.

Following the 'Great Crash' of 1929, agriculture was not the only industry in depression. However, it was further affected by the fall in demand for agricultural products: between 1929 and 1931, agricultural prices in the UK fell by 20 per cent. This time, in contrast to what happened in 1921, livestock farmers were also badly affected and not just cereal growers. Despite this, the Labour Government of 1929–31 refused to help farming as they were somewhat influenced by doctrinal beliefs against landowning.⁶

A National Government was formed in 1931 which included a significant number of Tories. They introduced, probably unwillingly, and fairly slowly, a policy of protection and subsidised support. Tariffs and quotas were imposed on imported foods although the so-called Ottawa agreements of 1932 gave preference to specified quantities of some food imports from the British Empire. So, whilst this spared the British producer from the full effects of world competition, he still had to operate under unfavourable conditions. The Agricultural Marketing Acts of 1931 and 1933 enabled the setting up of producer-controlled cartels. Marketing Boards were formed for hops (1932), milk (1933), pigs (1933), bacon (1933) and potatoes (1934). Finally, guaranteed prices were introduced for cattle in 1934, for wheat in 1932 and for oats and barley in 1937.

Figure 1 shows the overall agricultural land use change between 1921 and 1938, for England and Wales. These can be summarised as: first, the total agricultural area declined slightly due to urbanisation and forest planting; second, the area of arable crops, fallow and short-term grasses declined by over 2 million acres as cereal prices fell; third, the area of permanent grass rose by some 1.3 million acres; and, fourth, the area of rough grazing rose by about 880,000 acres. The rise in less intensive grassland and rough grazing land was because livestock prices held up better than those of crops and cereals. Furthermore, not only did the area of rough grazing land increase, but the state of farms and their buildings and field boundaries became poor. Indeed, maintenance hardly happened and scrub moved in according to some who were around at the time.⁷

⁵ Viscount Astor and B. S. Rowntree, *British agriculture: the principles of future policy* (1938), p. 113; M. J. Smith, 'Changing agendas and policy communities: agricultural issues in the 1930s and the 1980s', *Public Administration* 67 (1989), p. 156; Perren, *Agriculture in*

depression, p. 42.

⁶ Smith, *Politics of agricultural support*, p. 59.

⁷ J. Cherrington, 'Introduction', in A. G. Street, *Country calendar* (1986 edn), p. xi.

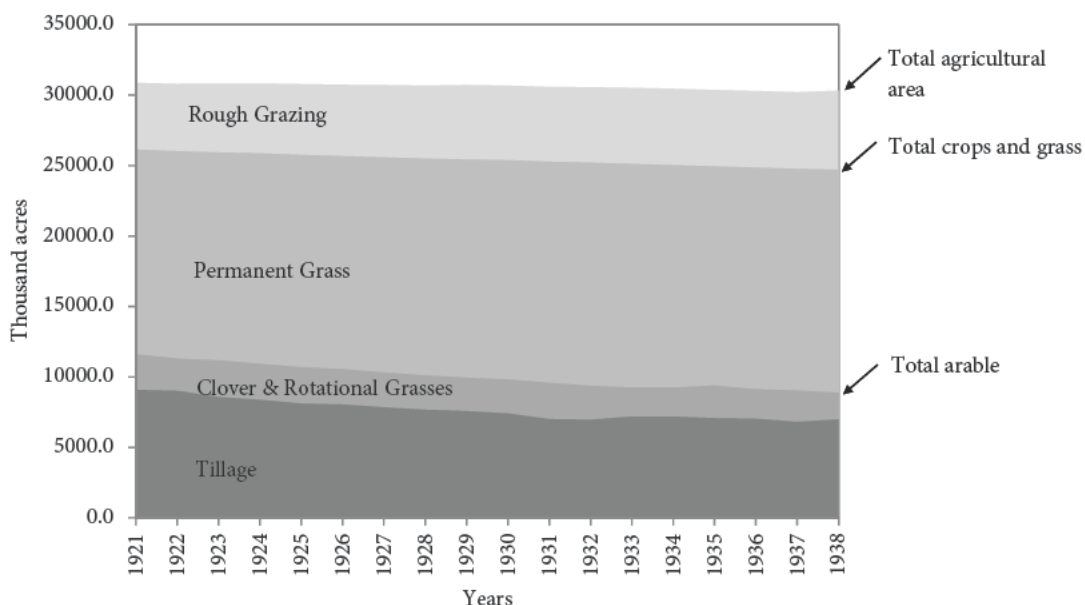


FIGURE 1. Agricultural land use, England and Wales, 1921–38.

Sources: Derived from Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Agricultural Statistics, 1921–38* (1922–39).

II

Following the above summary of changes in the background affecting British agriculture for 1921–38, two economic indicators that illustrate how serious the agricultural recession was at the national level became will be discussed. First, how the value of agricultural output and farming income changed and, second, how farmers' 'terms of trade' worsened over most of the period.

Taking Net Farm Income (NFI) first, Table 1 shows how NFI for the UK fell between 1920 and 1934 in real terms to around a third of the original level. When the column detailing agricultural output is examined, it will be seen that it was the large fall in output that was responsible. In the five years after this, things improved somewhat so that the real NFI became some 60 per cent of that in 1920–23 in 1935–39. This was as a result of the various support measures government took, causing both the volume and value of output to rise.

Now, let us turn to an examination of the terms of trade for farmers over the period shown in Table 2, which is for England and Wales, whereas Table 1 for output, costs and income was for the UK. Terms of trade is a ratio that economists calculate to examine the ratio between product prices received and prices of inputs used in producing the product. It can be seen how the prices farmers received for their products fell at a sharper rate than the prices they had to pay for the inputs they used to produce the various products – a 13 per cent fall, in fact, over the period 1921–38. In other words, they were having to produce more and more just to maintain their incomes. Again, as with output, costs and income, the recovery in terms of trade started to improve around 1934.

TABLE 1. Agricultural output, costs and Net Farm Income (NFI), UK, 1920–39

<i>Years</i>	<i>Output (£M)</i>	<i>Costs (£M)</i>	<i>NFI^a (£M)</i>	<i>NFI (£M in real 1986 terms)</i>
1920–23	409	275	134	2,151
1924–29	284	247	37	727
1930–34	245	212	33	747
1935–39	293	233	60	1,313

Note:

^a Net Farm Income results from the subtraction of total farming costs from farming output; in essence, it is a measure of ‘profit’.

Source: Derived from P. Brassley, ‘British farming between the wars’, in P. Brassley, J. Burchardt and L. Thompson (eds), *The English countryside between the wars* (2006), p. 198.

TABLE 2. The terms of trade for farmers, England and Wales, 1921–38 (1911–13=100)

<i>Years</i>	<i>Product prices</i>	<i>Input^a prices</i>	<i>Ratio of product to input price^b</i>
1921–23	182	180	102
1924–26	157	158	99
1927–29	145	154	94
1930–32	124	144	86
1933–35	115	135	85
1936–38	128	144	89

Notes:

^a This index is weighted according to farmers’ estimated annual purchases of seven categories of input: feed, fertilisers, store cattle, seeds, machinery, rent and labour.

^b The ratio of product price to input price is over 100 when product prices are high relative to input prices and less than 100 when product prices are relatively low compared to input prices.

Source: Adapted from C. J. Holmes, ‘Science and the farmer: the development of the agricultural advisory service in England and Wales, 1900–39’, *AgHR* 36 (1988), p. 84.

This deterioration in farmers’ terms of trade is probably the main reason why there was a steady rise from 1921–33 in the numbers of farmers going bankrupt (Table 3). However, after 1933 the numbers of insolvent farmers each year fell back down almost to the level experienced at the start of our study period. Average liability also fell. Nevertheless, to put this into perspective, at no time between 1921–38 were more than one in 500 farmers going bankrupt each year.⁸ In other words, the vast majority were ‘coping’ with the situation. Furthermore, this rate is much lower than that found during the recession in farming in the 1980s.⁹

⁸ R. S. G. Rutherford, ‘Bankrupt farmers between the wars’, *The Farm Economist* 4 (1943), pp. 95–6.

⁹ A. Harrison and R. B. Tranter, *The recession and farming: crisis or readjustment?* (1994), p. 38.

TABLE 3. Farming bankruptcies, England and Wales, 1921–38

Year	Numbers ^a	Average Liability (£)	Year	Numbers ^a	Average Liability (£)
1921	328	2,605	1930	419	2,240
1922	461	1,775	1931	588	2,050
1923	533	1,955	1932	687	2,005
1924	418	1,717	1933	532	1,700
1925	454	1,672	1934	366	1,475
1926	414	1,795	1935	367	1,202
1927	552	2,250	1936	336	1,195
1928	554	1,780	1937	392	1,440
1929	419	1,805	1938	355	1,435

Note:

^a Defined as 'Farmers, Gardeners and Dairymen, excluding Small Holders, Poultry Keepers and Market Gardeners'. Source: Adapted from R. S. G. Rutherford, 'Bankrupt farmers between the wars', *The Farm Economist* 4 (1943), pp. 95–6.

Not surprisingly, considering the financial pressure detailed above, both rents and farm land prices fell during the study period. For rents, there was little movement until 1925 when they were around £1.26 per acre. By 1931, they fell by some 16 per cent to £1.06 per acre and, by 1938, by around 10 per cent to £0.95 per acre.¹⁰ However, these broad trends, derived from non-governmental sources and based on a small sample, hide a large range in rent levels from those relatively high ones for rich vegetable growing land in East Anglia to those for hill land and very heavy or light soils in lowland England.¹¹

The changes in farmland prices for England and Wales were not as clear cut as for those of rents. What figures that are available for 1921–38 are taken from auction results, so care needs to be taken in interpreting them. No private treaty sale prices are available nor is the area sold by either method and land quality, or collated location information, is also not available. In addition, these auction results do not distinguish between land sold with, or without, buildings and with, or without, vacant possession.¹² Table 4 below shows details for the period. However, it can be summarised that land prices fell between 1921 and 1931 from £28 per acre by about 18 per cent, and then a period of gradual recovery followed to 1938 where prices reached £25 per acre.¹³

There is some evidence that, after the First World War until about 1928, many farm sales, perhaps up to 25 per cent, were to existing tenants as landowners grew tired of the low rents

¹⁰ H. T. Williams (ed.), *Principles for British agricultural policy* (1960), pp. 75–6.

¹¹ Perren, *Agriculture in depression*, p. 45.

¹² D. K. Britton, 'The sale value of farm land between the wars', *The Farm Economist* 6 (1949), pp. 126–7; J. T. Ward, 'Farm sales prices over a hundred years',

Estates Gazette, 3 May 1958, p. 47.

¹³ S. G. Sturme, 'The sale value of farm land and the long-term rate of interest, England and Wales, 1918 to 1950', *The Farm Economist* 8 (1955), pp. 22–3; Ward, 'Farm sale prices', p. 48.

TABLE 4. Farm sale prices^a on the Berkshire Downs^b compared with England and Wales^c, 1921–38 (£/acre)

<i>Period</i>	<i>Berkshire Downs</i>	<i>England and Wales</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>Berkshire Downs</i>	<i>England and Wales</i>
1921–25	15	28	1928–32	21	21
1922–26	12	28	1929–33	23	20
1923–27	11	28	1930–34	16	22
1924–28	10	27	1931–35	16	22
1925–29	18	25	1932–36	16	23
1926–30	19	24	1933–37	No sales	24
1927–31	21	23	1934–38	9	25

Notes:

^a Five year moving averages.

^b Berkshire Downs prices relate to 45 sales of 11,296 acres in total.

^c England and Wales prices are for 5,202 sales totalling 650,250 acres.

Sources: Berkshire Downs prices were extracted from: The Estates Gazette, *The land and house property year book for 1921 and 1922* (1922 and 1923) and The London Auction Mart, *The Estate Exchange year book for 1923–1938* (1924–1939). England and Wales prices are derived from: D. K. Britton, 'The sale value of farm land between the wars', *The Farm Economist* 6 (1949), pp. 125–33; and J. T. Ward, 'Farm sale prices over a hundred years', *Estates Gazette*, 3 May 1958, pp. 47–9.

they were receiving and sought better yielding investments. Some also faced death duties and had lost sons and heirs who in happier circumstances would have taken over the management of the family estates.¹⁴ Their tenants had a very good reason to buy as, despite the recession, they were worried that owners might put the farm up for sale on the open market.¹⁵ Furthermore, in those days, they only had one year's security of possession.¹⁶

Table 5 presents the main official metrics for agriculture in England and Wales for 1921, 1930 and 1938 for agricultural land use; livestock; agricultural workers; and agricultural holdings. Taking land use first, it can be seen that, as shown in Figure 1, the area of all arable land fell by 2.7 million acres (–23.6 per cent) over the period. However, the pace of change for the two components of the total arable area were very different for, whilst tillage fell relatively more between 1921–30 than for 1930–38, the area of clover and rotational grasses fell relatively more for the second part of the period when compared with the first. The reason for this disproportionate fall was the large drop in cereal prices during 1921–30 whilst the fall in livestock product prices was not as pronounced.¹⁷ To some extent the fall in arable area was offset by the

¹⁴ The Estates Gazette, *The land and house property year book for 1921* (1922), Introduction; Whetham, *Agrarian Hist.*, VIII, p. 122; D. Cannadine, *The decline and fall of the British aristocracy* (1989); Perren, *Agriculture in depression*, p. 41; J. Beckett and M. Turner, 'End of the Old Order? F. M. L. Thompson, The land question and the burden of ownership in England, c.1880–c.1925', *AgHR* 55 (2007), pp. 269–70; F. M. L. Thompson,

'The land market, 1880–1925: A reappraisal reappraised', *ibid.*, pp. 289–90.

¹⁵ Perren, *Agriculture in depression*, p. 45.

¹⁶ K. Cowling, D. Metcalf and A. J. Rayner, *The resource structure of agriculture: an economic analysis* (1970), p. 168.

¹⁷ See, for example, Perren, *Agriculture in depression*, p. 43.

TABLE 5. Agricultural land use, farm livestock, agricultural workers and agricultural holdings in England and Wales, 1921, 1930 and 1938

	Years			Change 1921–38 (%)
	1921	1930	1938	
Agricultural land use ('000 acres)				
Tillage	9,069	7,409	6,976	–23.1
Clover and rotational grasses	2,549	2,424	1,901	–25.4
Total arable	11,618	9,833	8,877	–23.6
Permanent grass	14,526	15,548	15,833	9.0
Total crops and grass	26,144	25,380	24,710	–5.5
Rough grazing	4,732	5,294	5,615	18.7
Total agricultural area	30,876	30,674	30,325	–1.8
Livestock numbers ('000 head)				
Total cattle	5,517	5,850	6,714	21.7
Total sheep	13,832	16,316	17,913	29.5
Total pigs	2,505	2,310	3,564	42.3
Total fowl	24,816	47,901	52,539	111.7
Agricultural workers ^a ('000 head)				
Regular whole-time	685	630	513	–25.1
Casual ^b	184	112	80	–56.5
Total workers	869	742	593	–31.8
Agricultural holdings ('000 holdings)				
Between 1 and 50 acres	278	255	226	–18.7
Over 300 acres	13	12	12	–7.7
Total holdings	420	396	366	–12.9

Notes:^a Excluding the occupier or principal partner and his wife, groundsmen and gardeners.^b Including regular part-time workers.*Sources:* Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Agricultural Statistics, 1921, 1930 and 1938* (1922, 1931 and 1939).

gradual increase in cereal yields that occurred over the period.¹⁸ The decline in the arable area was largely taken up by an increase over the period of 9 per cent in permanent grass, especially during 1921–30 and a rise in rough grazing land of around 19 per cent; the rise in these two categories of less intensive grassland was concentrated in the period 1921–30.

Turning now to movements in livestock numbers shown in Table 5 it is not surprising that

¹⁸ P. Brassley, 'Output and technical change in twentieth-century British agriculture', *AgHR* 48 (2000), pp. 66–72.

with the rise in less intensive grassland, numbers of cattle and sheep rose over the period by some 22 and 30 per cent respectively. Interestingly, the main rise in cattle numbers was in 1930–38 after the imposition of tariffs and the introduction of the Milk Marketing Board in the early 1930s.¹⁹ For 1921–30, although cattle numbers rose, they were held back by the level of beef and dairy produce imports in that period. Sheep numbers rose to take advantage of the increase in permanent grassland and rough grazing and, later in the period, sheep producers received some protection from the re-introduction of tariffs. Whilst pig numbers rose by 42 per cent over the study period, in 1921–30 their numbers actually fell; the substantial rise in their numbers after 1930 must only be due to the introduction of tariffs affecting imports from, especially, Denmark. Some of this ‘new’ production was outdoors on the increased areas of permanent grassland.

The livestock that showed the largest rise during the study period was fowl, whose numbers rose by 112 per cent. Much of this was made up by free range flocks for both meat and eggs, because of their increasing role in substituting for beef in the public’s diet. Poultry production also provided ideal low capital-intensive diversified enterprises for farm family members to take up, often starting in a small way.²⁰

Movements in agricultural workers over the period were also substantial. The number of regular whole-time workers fell, and it should be appreciated as footnotes of Table 5 clarify, that these figures do not include the ‘occupier or principal partner and his wife’, i.e. the main decision-maker and his/her partner/wife. Bearing in mind this proviso, numbers of regular whole-time workers fell by 25 per cent over the period, with the most pronounced fall of such labour being in 1930–38; it should also be remembered that this category included all the other family workers other than the ‘principal partner and his wife’ and so it is not surprising that the falling trend was less than that overall (at some 32 per cent), probably because it was easier to ‘let go’ non-family members than family members such as sons and daughters. Thus, Table 5 shows that the fall in ‘casual’ workers, which included regular part-time workers, was 57 per cent over the period, with most of these losses being in the first part of the study period. Interestingly, this was the opposite position for that of regular full-time workers whose main fall was in the second part of the study period. This can be explained by it being easier to save such a fixed cost by reducing regular part-time workers first, before dispensing of full-time employees which would mean family workers.

Finally, in this ‘snapshot’ of the main descriptive metrics of British agriculture over the period, we turn to changes in the number of agricultural holdings shown in Table 5. Over the period, the number of holdings, which are a proxy for ‘farms’ or ‘farm businesses’, fell by around 13 per cent, or 54,000 holdings.²¹ Some of this will have been caused by bankruptcies, but most will have been retirements, particularly where no heir was available to take over.

¹⁹ See, for example, Williams, *Principles*, pp. 14–15; Nash, ‘Changes in external factors’, p. 38; and R. J. Moore-Colyer, ‘Farming in depression: Wales between the Wars, 1919–1939’, *AgHR* 46 (1998), p. 179.

²⁰ W. M. Elkington, ‘Poultry in agriculture’, *JRASE* 90 (1929), pp. 141–62.

²¹ In A. Harrison, ‘Some features of farm business

structures’, *J. Agricultural Economics* 16 (1965), p. 330, a farm is defined ‘so as to embrace such farming activities as fall within the compass of a given fund of capital’. He also found that farms amounted to only 85% of the number of holdings as some larger farm businesses consisted of more than one holding.

When the size of holdings is scrutinised, it can be seen that there was a fall of more than twice as many 'small' holdings than 'large' ones, with the former being delineated as being between one and 50 acres and the latter being 300 acres and over. This suggests that, with the low land prices discussed above, and detailed in Table 4, existing owner-occupiers were buying up smaller holdings, especially those in financial trouble. There will also have been some tenants who took advantage of buying any small pieces of land whether they came on the open market or not, including some of these 'small' holdings.

So, as a reaction to financial pressure, we have seen that farmers cut their fixed costs, especially labour, and changed their farming systems and land use where they could to minimise the financial impact of the recession. Or, in John McNerney's words, they were adjusting by 'groping, coping and hoping'!²²

III

Little has been written about the Berkshire Downs or, indeed, is known about them. For example, Massingham wrote regarding the area: 'When a given county is fairly familiar to most people who take an intelligent interest in the English countryside, it is sure to have a book written about it, called "Unknown Blankshire", simply because they are genuinely unknown ... This is the more singular in view of the fact that they stand accessible between the Midlands and the South and, as landscape, are highly individual'.²³

What we shall loosely call the Berkshire Downs, the area of examination here, is in general terms, a rectangle of up to 120,000 acres bounded by the market towns of Wantage in the north and Newbury to the south (see Figure 2). At the western extreme are the villages of Ashbury and East Garston and, in the east, those of Aldworth and Ashampstead. Most of the land lies at between 400–500 feet in a series of undulating rounded hills or 'downs' as they are commonly called.

The Countryside Commission and English Nature published the results of their Landscape Character Assessment of England in 1996 which divided the country into a series of Landscape Character Areas.²⁴ This work was continued by the Countryside Agency and, even though it was written around 80 years after the period we are now examining, it is useful for setting the study area in context.²⁵ To paraphrase from the assessment, the Berkshire Downs can be seen as a distinctive area encompassing broad expanses of open downland dissected by numerous dry valleys, richly-farmed vale landscapes with areas of extensive woodland. There is a dramatic scarp (of about 600 feet high) at the northern edge with much of the original chalk downland being replaced by very large arable fields. The clumps and belts of trees were planted in an attempt to provide shelter for crops. Horse training gallops are a common feature linked to the numerous racing stables.²⁶

²² McNerney, *Economic adjustment*, pp. 3, 9 and 15.

²³ H. J. Massingham, *English Downland* (1936), p. 90.

²⁴ Countryside Commission and English Nature, *The character of England: landscape, wildlife and natural features* (1996), p. 116.

²⁵ The Countryside Agency, 'Berkshire and

Marlborough Downs', in *Countryside character*, VII, *South East and London* (1999), pp. 89–93.

²⁶ D. Boyd, *The running horses. A brief history of racing in Berkshire from 1740* (1978), p. 26, shows nine concentrations of trainers on the Berkshire Downs in the first part of the twentieth century.

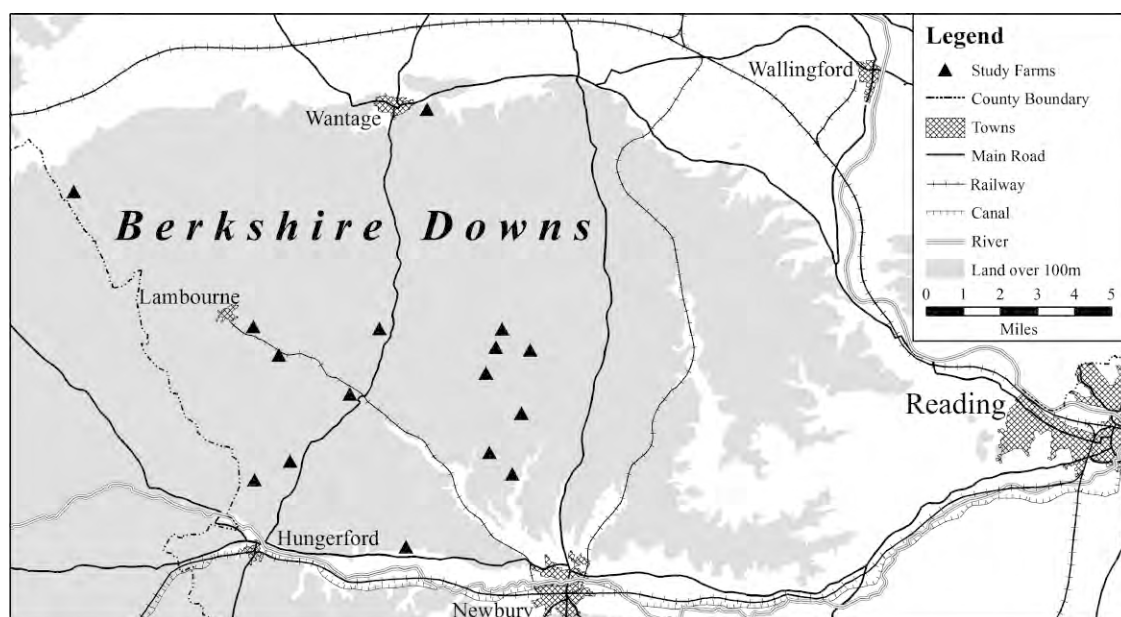


FIGURE 2. The study area in the 1930s

The few who have written about the Berkshire Downs regarded them as a special place: 'The chalk of Berkshire is less than half the county. But it has enough beauty to fill a continent'²⁷ and

There is no time of year, and there are probably few days, when this piece of country and its cultivation do not show some aspect which attracts. There is something in the open spacious country broken by its rise and fall and in the aspect of the good, active farming that prevails, which compels interest and admiration.²⁸

In very simplified terms, at the beginning of the study period, much of the Berkshire Downs was under mixed 'corn and sheep' farming, with the corn (cereal) crop, usually barley, being preceded by roots and followed by leys of grass and clover mixtures folded off to sheep of the traditional heavy Down breeds. These sheep, whose dunging and treading was regarded as essential for fertility management, also used the widespread rough grazing areas on the Downs. There were few hedges or fences and most farms were large even by modern standards. Rectangular shaped farms were common with the farmhouse and associated buildings being in the valley bottom with the rest of the farm running up to grazing land on the down.²⁹

Generally, the type of farm varied as one traversed from north to south across the study area and can be classified into four general groups.³⁰ First, the north-west Berkshire Downs.

²⁷ Massingham, *English Downland*, p. 102.

²⁸ C. J. Boyd-Orr, *Agriculture in Berkshire: a survey made on behalf of the Institute for Research in Agricultural Economics, University of Oxford* (1918), pp. 24–5.

²⁹ E. Thomas, 'Agriculture in the south and south Midland counties', in J. P. Maxton (ed.), *Regional types of British Agriculture* (1936), p. 10; Boyd-Orr, *Agriculture*

in Berkshire, pp. 24–6; Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Markets and fairs in England and Wales*, IV, *eastern and southern markets* (1929), p. 28; and C. J. Smith, *Ecology of the English chalk* (1980), p. 406.

³⁰ Boyd-Orr, *Agriculture in Berkshire*, pp. 24–39; S. L. Huthnance, 'Farming in Berkshire and Oxfordshire', *JRASE* 110 (1949), pp. 10–12.

Many farms here were up to 1,000 acres in long narrow strips running from the clay in the north up onto the Downs. Dairy herds were down on the clay and the downlands had barley. Second, the chalk proper where again 1,000-acre farms were common, but geared up to grain production. Very large fields prevailed with almost no hedges but some bushes. Later on in the study period, some outdoor milking bails came to be used on these farms. Rotations were commonly: wheat or barley, barley, clover ley, wheat or barley, barley and then fallow. Third, the next group of farms going south were on red loam containing many flints overlaying the actual chalk. These farms were smaller than the previous group, being some 300–500 acres in size. As it was easier on these loam soils to establish leys, more dairy cows were found than in the two more northerly groups. Fourth, the final group of farms were on the chalk slope sloping down the southern face of the ridge, going down to the Kennet Valley between Hungerford and Reading. This was fairly heavily wooded with a wide mix of soils. Farms were medium to small in size with much milk production, particularly from pedigree herds.

A further impression of the size of the farms on the Berkshire Downs at that time can be derived from Boyd-Orr's *Agriculture in Berkshire*, in which he discusses 17 specific downland farms whose average size in 1918 this author calculated as 1,685 acres.³¹

IV

In Table 4 data on farm land prices for the Berkshire Downs are presented. They are drawn from the same source as the prices for England and Wales discussed in Section II above, and the same provisos apply.³² Because of the relatively few (45) sales for the Berkshire Downs listed for the study period, prices are presented in a series of five-year moving averages in order to try to make it easier to detect a trend. It can be seen that for no five-year period was the average price over £23 per acre; from 1921 to 1926 prices fell by some 30 per cent; from 1926 to 1931 they rose again to £23 per acre; and from 1931 to 1938 they fell again. Three further observations should also be made about these figures for farm sale prices on the Berkshire Downs. First, whilst it is clear that they are low when compared with those for England and Wales as a whole, because they are the result of open auctions, they almost certainly are much higher than private treaty sales and those between landlords and their former tenants – the so-called 'arms lengths' sales. Second, at some 250 acres on average, the farms sold on the Berkshire Downs listed in Table 4 were twice the size of those sold by auction for England and Wales as a whole. Third, only three of the 45 sales were labelled as from an estate, the rest appearing to be individual owner-occupied farms. However, there may have been farms put up for sale by estates that did not sell or were 'bought-in', having not reached a satisfactory selling price.

V

In Table 6, cropping and stocking levels, as well as the numbers of agricultural workers and holdings, are detailed for 1921, 1930 and 1938 for 27 key parishes on what can be described as the Berkshire Downs 'proper', i.e. parishes no part of which was in the lower-lying Vale of the

³¹ Boyd-Orr, *Agriculture in Berkshire*, pp. 24–39.

³² See n. 12 above for sources.

White Horse in the area north of the Berkshire Downs or to the south in the Kennet Valley. This parish level data is taken from the parish summaries of the compulsory annual June census returns which all occupiers of farm land had to complete. (To preserve confidentiality about individual holdings, only summaries at the parish level have been retained.) When using this source, great care needs to be taken to allow for changes in thresholds of inclusion over time (such as in minimum size of holding) as well as in definitions, for example, of rough grazing land. The proportionate change over the study period is shown in the right-hand column. The total area in agricultural use in these key parishes was just over 70,000 acres and, in the first year of comparison (1921), it included 441 agricultural holdings.

Over the study period, the number of all holdings on the Berkshire Downs fell by almost 20 per cent. However, whilst smaller holdings (those between 1 and 50 acres) fell by some 34 per cent, large holdings (over 300 acres) only fell by seven in number (8.9 per cent) presumably as some of the smaller holdings were incorporated into them. It should be remembered though, as pointed out above, that holdings do not equate with 'farm businesses' or 'farms', so these figures should be treated with a degree of caution. Despite this proviso, in 1921 the average area of a holding was 160 acres, in 1930 182 acres and, in 1938, 199 acres, a rise over the period of 24 per cent.

Looking at agricultural land use first, it can be seen that the total arable area fell by some 15,000 acres (-30.4 per cent) over the period; the proportionate fall in the two components that made up this was higher for clover and rotational grasses than for tillage. The area of permanent grass more than doubled over the period and the area of rough grazing went up by 40 per cent as farmers gave up arable farming as cereal prices were so poor, went into milk production and, also, to a certain extent, virtually 'hibernated' some of their land whilst the recession was on.

Over the period, total cattle numbers rose by almost 5,000 (120 per cent) with most of this rise being between 1930 and 1938, probably as cattle feed was by then relatively cheap, tariffs against imports having been re-introduced and the Milk Marketing Board set up.³³ Sheep numbers on the Berkshire Downs hardly changed over the period but both pigs and poultry rose in number by over 100 per cent. However, this overall movement hides some important changes over the period. For example, pig numbers fell between 1921 and 1930 but then more than doubled between 1930 and 1938 as the newly introduced tariffs helped protect against pig meat imports from Denmark. Much of this increase in pig numbers was probably outdoors on the Downs. Pig production benefitted from the fall in the price of feed as cereal prices fell overall. For fowl, the main rise in numbers occurred between 1921 and 1930 when numbers increased by some 35,000, whereas after this the rise was only some 11,000 head. Most of this increase in the numbers of fowl was outdoor production on the increasing area of permanent grassland highlighted above.³⁴ Proximity to London helped this good example of diversification and some markets in Berkshire flourished from this increase in the production of eggs and poultry meat.³⁵

The number of agricultural workers on the Berkshire Downs fell by nearly 700 (-37.6 per cent) over the study period, although this overall figure masks some interesting changes in

³³ See n. 19 above for sources.

³⁴ Thomas, 'Agriculture in the south', pp. 11-12.

³⁵ Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Markets and fairs*, IV, p. 29.

TABLE 6. Agricultural land use, farm livestock, agricultural workers and agricultural holdings on the Berkshire Downs^a, 1921, 1930 and 1938

	Years			Change 1921–38 (%)
	1921	1930	1938	
Agricultural land use (acres)				
Tillage	40,445	32,004	29,348	–27.4
Clover and rotational grasses	10,924	8,260	6,426	–41.2
Total arable	51,369	40,264	35,774	–30.4
Permanent grass	13,072	22,559	26,569	103.3
Total crops and grass	64,441	62,823	62,343	3.3
Rough grazing	6,146	8,218	8,602	40.0
Total agricultural area	70,587	71,041	70,945	0.5
Livestock numbers (head)				
Total cattle	4,165	5,722	9,157	119.9
Total sheep	20,155	23,193	22,388	11.1
Total pigs	2,720	2,376	5,752	111.5
Total fowl	43,361	78,328	89,054	105.4
Agricultural workers ^b (head)				
Regular whole-time	1,477	1,281	1,040	–29.6
Casual ^c	280	98	56	–80.0
Total workers	1,757	1,379	1,096	–37.6
Agricultural holdings (number of holdings)				
Between 1 and 50 acres	237	187	157	–33.8
Over 300 acres	79	79	72	–8.9
Total holdings	441	390	356	–19.3

Notes:^a 27 parishes totalling just over 70,000 acres in agricultural use.^b Excluding the occupier or principal partner and his wife, groundsmen and gardeners.^c Includes regular part-time workers.*Sources:* TNA, MAF 68/3014, MAF 68/3500 and MAF 68/3859.

the component labour types. For example, ‘casual’ labour, which included regular part-time workers, fell by 80 per cent over the period, most of which was in the early part (1921–30) of the period whilst regular whole-time labour declined more gradually for the reasons put forward earlier for England and Wales. Using the figures in Table 6, a crude calculation reveals that, if one excludes the occupier or principal partner of the holding and his wife, on the Berkshire Downs each worker looked after 40 acres in 1921, whereas by 1938 it was around 65 acres.

TABLE 7. Financial performance on four case-study Berkshire Downs farms, 1925–38 (£)

Harvest Year	Case-study Farm 1 ^a				Case-study Farm 2 ^b			
	Output	Costs	Net Margin	Net Margin per acre	Output	Costs	Net Margin	Net Margin per acre
1925	–	–	–	–	1,961	1,658	303	0.89
1926	–	–	–	–	1,728	1,795	–67	–0.20
1927	–	–	–	–	1,610	2,020	–410	–1.21
1928	–	–	–	–	2,249	1,893	356	1.05
1929	–	–	–	–	1,072	1,524	–452	–1.33
1930	1,573	1,653	–80	–0.24	1,958	1,356	602	1.77
1931	2,204	1,889	315	0.95	782	1,105	–323	–0.95
1932	2,212	1,656	556	1.68	1,613	1,475	138	0.41
1933	3,229	2,807	422	1.28	1,736	1,474	262	0.77
1934	2,598	2,653	–55	–0.17	1,993	1,608	385	1.13
1935	3,297	2,766	531	1.61	–	–	–	–
1936	3,401	3,025	376	0.95	–	–	–	–
1937	3,878	3,109	769	1.94	–	–	–	–
1938	4,022	2,973	1,049	2.65	–	–	–	–
Size: 330 acres to 1935; 396 acres from 1936. Enterprises: milk, cattle, sheep (from 1932), pigs and cereals. Tenure: rented.					Size: 340 acres. Enterprises: cattle, pigs, cereals and poultry (from 1930). Tenure: mainly rented.			

Notes:^a Halfway Farm, Kintbury.^b North Hidden and Old Hayward Farms, Leverton.^c Home Farm, Charlton.^d Idstone Farm, Idstone.*Sources:* For case study farms 1–4 respectively MERL, FR BER 14, FR BER 18, FR BER 33 and FR BER 34.

Whilst some of this change can be explained by the rise of the tractor, most of it was due to farmers cutting their fixed costs to cope with the recession.³⁶

Table 7 summarises the financial performance of four case-study farms on the Berkshire Downs for various years between 1925–38, derived from material in the Farm Records collection of the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL), University of Reading. Their locations are shown in Figure 2. Data from account books, farm diaries and other financial records were used to calculate annual financial output and costs totals which then enabled the derivation of a net margin (or profit or loss figure) for each of the case study farms. These net margins are presented as a total for each farm for each year the records were

³⁶ E. H. Whetham, 'The mechanisation of British farming, 1910–1945', *J. Agricultural Economics* 21 (1970), pp. 320–1.

TABLE 7. *continued*

<i>Harvest Year</i>	<i>Case-study Farm 3^c</i>				<i>Case-study Farm 4^d</i>			
	<i>Output</i>	<i>Costs</i>	<i>Net Margin</i>	<i>Net Margin per acre</i>	<i>Output</i>	<i>Costs</i>	<i>Net Margin</i>	<i>Net Margin per acre</i>
1925	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
1926	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
1927	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
1928	964	1,209	–245	–0.82	3,780	3,723	57	0.10
1929	863	902	–39	–0.13	3,716	3,606	110	0.18
1930	638	793	–155	–0.52	2,968	2,871	97	0.16
1931	–	–	–	–	2,380	2,571	–191	–0.32
1932	–	–	–	–	3,354	2,772	582	0.97
1933	–	–	–	–	3,869	3,277	592	0.99
1934	1,111	1,211	–100	–0.33	3,862	4,157	–295	–0.49
1935	–	–	–359	–1.20	3,503	3,374	129	0.22
1936	–	–	–331	–1.10	3,584	3,434	150	0.25
1937	–	–	–361	–1.20	4,036	4,261	–225	–0.38
1938	–	–	226	0.75	4,879	4,031	848	1.41
Size: 300 acres. Enterprises: cattle and cereals. Tenure: rented.					Size: 600 acres. Enterprises: milk, cattle, sheep, pigs and cereals. Tenure: mixed tenure.			

available and, also, as a per acre figure. It should, however, be appreciated that these four farms might be unusual for the time in that, not only did their operators keep fairly good financial records, but also they, or their successors, made the decision to deposit these records at MERL for public viewing.

No particularly noticeable trend can be observed from Table 7 except to say that the annual net margins, even when positive, were very low both per farm, and on a per acre basis. Indeed, of the 38 annual farm financial performance summaries presented, in only one case was the net margin per acre over £2, and only in 21 of the 38 years positive. Of the 21 positive net margins, 10 were less than £1 per acre. Furthermore, only nine of these were as high as £1 per acre. It also appears that case-study Farms 2 and 3, which did not have a milk enterprise, performed worse financially over the period than did case-study Farms 1 and 4 which did have a milk enterprise. The fact should also be pointed out that each of the case-study farms were rented, or mainly rented, with all the consequent financial ramifications that this entailed, such as not being able to control their rent levels.

From the records at MERL, we have attempted to piece together in more detail than Table 7 exhibits a sense of how the four case-study farms ‘coped’ with the recession whilst ‘hoping’

for better days to come. What was common to all four was that their landlords reduced their rent somewhat whilst, for two of them, paying for repairs that would usually have been the responsibility of the tenant.

Case-study Farm 1 made two strategic decisions to counter the recession. First, they introduced a sheep enterprise in 1932 based on the buying-in of store lambs in the early summer and selling them fat later on. Second, they rented an additional 66 acres in 1936. During the period they also increased the number of dairy cows in a bid to increase output, but it is debatable whether this improved financial performance as it increased expenditure on cattle feed. Case-study Farm 2 decided to replace some of the area previously devoted to beef cattle and pigs by introducing an egg-laying free-range poultry flock in 1930 which certainly improved cash sales and, probably, profitability. They also started growing clover and sainfoin for sale as seed. For the three years from 1932, net margin steadily improved on this farm so it is frustrating that no business records remain after 1934 to enable a thorough assessment of whether this 'coping' strategy worked.

Of the four farms, case-study Farm 3 is unusual because when the tenant starting renting it in 1927, it was in an almost derelict state having being farmed in-hand. Originally, being beef cattle and cereals, the new tenant decided to keep more animals and rear them more intensively. To do this he increased the amount of labour used but cut machinery costs. The result was that, of the eight years of financial results available, only in the harvest year of 1938 was a positive net margin achieved. Case-study Farm 4 increased their milk net output by feeding more concentrates, cutting labour costs and raising machinery costs. They also built-up an outdoor pig enterprise on land released from that formerly devoted to sheep grazing.

We will now turn from these four farms to the operation of the farms on the Berkshire Downs run by George Baylis (1846–1936). He has been heralded as an especially innovative farmer who entered farming relatively late, having been articled to a solicitor, and was said to be able to farm profitably when others were failing. He did this mainly by concentrating on continuous arable farming on a six-course rotation with few or no livestock and the use of much inorganic fertiliser rather than the dung from folded sheep. In this way, farming in an unchanged manner for some 50 years, he became one of the largest farmers in England in the early twentieth century. His estate was largely on the Berkshire Downs and consisted of 12 owner-occupied farms (shown on Figure 2). He also had considerable areas of rented land, including some on the nearby Hampshire Downs.³⁷

Table 8 summarises the financial performance of the 12,000-acre Baylis estate for the years 1923–36. The materials allow the calculation of annual financial output and costs totals and, then, a net margin (or profit or loss figure) for the estate as a whole as with the four case studies above. As in Table 7, the net margin figures are presented both as a total for the whole estate and, also as a per acre figure. They have been calculated in exactly the same way using identical definitions for each individual output and cost item.

What stands out from Table 8 is in only four of the 14 years shown did the estate register a positive net margin or profit (1925, 1926, 1935 and 1936) and that for each of these profitable

³⁷ R. Brigden, 'Baylis, George (1846–1936), farmer', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004); H. G. Robinson, 'Notable farming enterprises', *JRASE* 91 (1930), pp. 29–34.

TABLE 8. Financial performance of the farms^a of George Baylis on the Berkshire Downs, 1923–36 (£)

<i>Harvest Year</i>	<i>Output</i>	<i>Costs</i>	<i>Net Margin</i>	<i>Net Margin per acre</i>
1923	32,510	51,793	-19,283	-1.61
1924	43,858	45,425	-1,567	-0.13
1925	47,486	42,980	4,506	0.38
1926	48,194	46,190	2,004	0.17
1927	44,753	46,976	-2,223	-0.19
1928	37,160	46,705	-9,545	-0.80
1929	44,270	45,189	-919	-0.08
1930	34,074	40,731	-6,657	-0.55
1931	31,464	44,532	-13,068	-1.09
1932	20,749	35,532	-14,783	-1.23
1933	24,152	36,449	-12,297	-1.02
1934	24,145	30,622	-6,477	-0.54
1935	32,057	29,457	2,600	0.22
1936	29,396	28,965	431	0.04

Note:

^a These included 12 owned farms on the Berkshire Downs totalling 5,782 acres with a further 6,218 acres rented, some on the Hampshire Downs. The total of 12,000 acres held from 1922 to the death of George Baylis in May 1936 included farms ranging from 170 acres to 875 acres in size. The enterprises were mainly cereals with some cattle and sheep.

Source: MERL, FR BAY A/1.

years, the net margin was much less than £1 per acre. Furthermore, for four of the loss-making years, the overall loss was considerable in total and was over £1 an acre. When examining the figures in detail, the few livestock enterprises on the estate were profitable over the whole period but the arable enterprises failed to perform. Such a poor financial performance from someone who is regarded as an icon of successful innovative farming practice is intriguing. It is less than one would expect from the literature that largely extols his farming skills. In managerial terms, it has been argued that Baylis did badly at this time because of his relatively high labour costs. He was very slow to replace horses by tractors, resulting in his having to devote a considerable acreage of land to growing horse fodder.³⁸ However, perhaps it correctly reflects the financial situation for farming at the time. Other farmers on the Berkshire Downs, who have not left equivalent detailed financial records to enable any evaluation, may have performed even worse in financial terms.

It has been shown above how innovation took place and diversification tried at the national level in an attempt to cope with the difficult economic conditions in the study period. Such actions also took place at the local level on the Berkshire Downs. For example, and most notably, was the invention and spread of Arthur Hosier's moveable milking bails from his base

³⁸ Robinson, 'Notable enterprises', pp. 33–4.



FIGURE 3. One of Mr Arthur Hosier's milking bails in use in the early 1930s. From the Eric Guy Collection, MERL, University of Reading, MERL P DX 289/195a.

at Wexcombe on the Berkshire/Wiltshire Downs border. Hosier used his fertile imagination to develop a system of outdoor dairying in areas with no fences or water. Machine milking was carried out away from the farmstead in the bails (see Figure 3), the cows spending their days in moveable enclosures. Not only were the capital costs lower, the cows were healthier, no mucking-out was required or the carrying into the farm buildings of hay, roots and straw as the cows were kept outside all year.³⁹ Concentrates were fed in the bails to persuade the cows in for milking and every few days the bail was pulled to fresh land either on wheels or skids, leaving the patch of land it had been situated on well-fertilised. Hosier started marketing bails in 1927.⁴⁰ In 1932, 92 were in use over England with four in Berkshire and, by 1941, 195 farmers were using them, eleven in Berkshire.⁴¹

A. T. Loyd, owner of the Lockinge Estate near Wantage, is another example of an imaginative and innovative landowner operating on the Berkshire Downs. Coming from an established career in the Egyptian public service, on his inheritance in 1920 he took over an estate of around 10,000 acres of in-hand land. He also inherited several thousand acres of tenanted farms in the downland parishes of Farnborough, the Ilsleys, Compton and Beedon. He quickly reduced arable production and moved more to livestock production with the original

³⁹ C. S. Orwin, *Progress in English farming systems*, V, *A pioneer of progress in farm management* (1931), pp. 17–20; Williams, *Principles*, pp. 131–2; Whetham, *Agrarian Hist.*, VIII, p. 191.

⁴⁰ R. D. Brigden, *Success in the press: a journalistic perspective on inter-war farming* (1997), p. 23.

⁴¹ R. N. Dixey, 'The progress of bail milking', *The Farm Economist* 3 (1941), pp. 171–2.

Shorthorn beef herd being converted into a dual-purpose one with the emphasis on milk production. A Guernsey herd was introduced to produce high fat Tuberculin-Tested milk for the national market. The sheep on the estate were changed from the heavy Hampshire Down arable/corn type breed to the smaller Kerry Hill sheep suitable for a more grass-based system. In addition, a large outdoor poultry flock for meat was introduced in the mid-1930s. Loyd also tried to diversify. This included a plan to make straw rope from surplus wheat straw for export, and a scheme to breed and rear Dartmoor ponies on the rough grazing land of the estate on the Downs. However, it turned out there was little demand for the straw rope made and the ponies proved to be unruly and difficult to sell!⁴²

During the 1930s, the *Farmer and Stockbreeder* ran a series on 'Successful Women Farmers'. Two of these were farmers on the Berkshire Downs. First, was Mrs Taylor of Oare Farm, Hermitage, extending to some 450 acres. To maximize returns, she cut out the middleman by having a retail milk round perhaps in Newbury (the article does not say) and the cows were kept outside as much as possible to save labour costs on mucking out the buildings. Following a study tour to Denmark, she established a pig herd on Danish lines with much attention being paid to hygiene and the use of disinfectants. She also established a moveable flock of egg-laying hens on her pasture land to help with both cash flow and the provision of fertility.⁴³

The second 'Successful Women Farmer' was Mrs Spottiswoode of Rooksnest Farm, Lambourne. She had an open-air Welsh Black dairy herd with both butter and milk being sold direct on a retail round (again, the article does not say where) and 160 outdoor porkers were also produced each year. Meticulous physical and financial records were also kept for each department of her farm business for comparative purposes both against her own previous performance and also against other farmers. This enabled her to be ruthless in her culling policy – if a cow did not produce 800 gallons in their second lactation they were sold for beef.⁴⁴

The *Farmers Weekly*, launched in June 1934, might well have 'copied' the *Farmer and Stockbreeder* by quickly running a 'Successful Farming' series of 201 articles over the ensuing four years.⁴⁵ One of these articles centred on a progressive Berkshire Downs farmer, Mr Alfred Barclay, who ran three dairy herds on over 1,500 acres at Compton. At a time when TB was rife, Mr Barclay was a pioneer in the production of Tuberculin-Tested milk and, for the 25 years he farmed there, he was rigorous about disease prevention by, for example, hardly buying-in any new stock. Furthermore, his three dairies were situated high up and the arable land on his estate was used as a buffer strip between each of the three downland grazing areas. All the milk, averaging some 2,300 gallons a week, was sold wholesale having been bottled on farm and sold as 'certified' to obtain a premium over much of the milk being sold at that time.⁴⁶

⁴² M. A. Havinden, *Estate villages: a study of the Berkshire villages of Ardington and Lockinge* (1966), pp. 120–5.

⁴³ 'Mrs Taylor, Oare Farm, Hermitage, Berkshire', *The Farmer and Stock-breeder* 49, 1 Apr. 1935, p. 753.

⁴⁴ 'Mrs Spottiswoode, Rooksnest, Lambourne, Berkshire', *The Farmer and Stockbreeder* 49, 9 Sept. 1935,

p. 2025.

⁴⁵ J. Harris, 'Fifty years of the Farming Weeklies', *JRASE* 145 (1984), p. 101; Brigden, 'Success in the press', p. 81.

⁴⁶ 'Research into animal diseases', *Farmers Weekly*, 15 Oct. 1937, pp. 16–17.

To conclude, we have seen that farmers on the Berkshire Downs were quick to change their cropping and stocking patterns to reduce the effects of the recession. There is also individual evidence that there was no lack of imaginative innovation shown at the local level by those seeking ways of counteracting the economic pressure on their farm businesses.

VI

We have seen the changes in agricultural land use, farm livestock, agricultural workers and holdings for the period 1921–38 by, first, England and Wales and, then, for 27 core parishes on the Berkshire Downs. These key metrics of agriculture are shown side by side in proportionate change terms in Table 9 for ease of comparison together with the results of a test of the statistical significance of the observed differences.

Before discussing these local versus national comparisons in detail, it is worth making the point that between 1921 and 1938 there was a very similar rise in the area of owner-occupied land for the Berkshire Downs against England and Wales (18 per cent to 30 per cent owner-occupied for the former over the period and 20 per cent to 33 per cent respectively for the latter).⁴⁷ In other words, it seems that both locally and nationally there was a similar trend towards owner-occupation through landowners selling tenanted land to both their tenants and original owner-occupiers.

Taking agricultural land first, although there was a larger fall in the total arable area on the Berkshire Downs, and in the area of clover and rotational grasses as compared with England and Wales as a whole, none of these changes were statistically significant. Whilst the growth of rough grazing land on the Berkshire Downs was more than twice that in England and Wales and that of the area of permanent grass was more than 10 times the rate in England and Wales, only this latter change was statistically significantly different.

With the trends in livestock numbers over the study period, there were large differences in proportionate changes between England and Wales and the Berkshire Downs. For example, whilst the numbers of cattle and pigs more than doubled on the Berkshire Downs in comparison with England and Wales, only the six-fold increase in cattle on the Berkshire Downs was comparatively statistically significant. Nationally, the rise in the numbers of total fowl was higher than for the Berkshire Downs, a change that was statistically significant.

For agricultural workers, the proportionate fall in the numbers of all workers was some 6 per cent more for the Berkshire Downs compared with England and Wales, and the fall in casual workers was nearly 25 per cent more on the Berkshire Downs; none of these differences proved to be statistically significant. Similarly, whilst it can be seen from Table 9 that the fall in the total number of agricultural holdings was some 6 per cent more for the Berkshire Downs as compared with England and Wales, and some 15 per cent more for ‘small’ holdings of between one and 50 acres for the same geographical areas, none of these comparative changes was statistically significant.

⁴⁷ See the sources for Table 9.

TABLE 9. Changes in agricultural land use, farm livestock, agricultural workers and agricultural holdings: the Berkshire Downs compared with England and Wales, 1921–1938 (per cent) together with a test of the statistical significance of the observed differences

	<i>England and Wales</i>	<i>Berkshire Downs^a</i>	<i>Z statistic^b</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>Statistical significance</i>
Agricultural land use					
Tillage	–23.1	–27.4	0.322	0.678	ns
Clover and rotational grasses	–25.4	–41.2	0.565	0.668	ns
Total arable	–23.6	–30.4	0.538	0.678	ns
Permanent grass	9.0	103.3	–2.183	0.014	*
Total crops and grass	–5.5	3.3	–0.827	0.204	ns
Rough grazing	18.7	40.4	–0.617	0.268	ns
Total agricultural area	–1.8	0.5	–0.984	0.163	ns
Livestock numbers					
Total cattle	21.7	119.9	–2.069	0.019	*
Total sheep	29.5	11.1	0.065	0.825	ns
Total pigs	42.3	111.5	–0.845	0.199	ns
Total fowl	111.7	105.4	–2.215	0.013	*
Agricultural workers ^c					
Regular whole-time	–25.1	–29.6	0.046	0.830	ns
Casual ^d	–56.5	–80.0	0.189	0.791	ns
Total workers	–31.8	–37.6	0.108	0.814	ns
Agricultural holdings					
Between 1 and 50 acres	–18.7	–33.8	0.033	0.833	ns
Over 300 acres	–7.7	–8.9	0.014	0.838	ns
Total holdings	–12.9	–19.3	0.023	0.836	ns

Notes:

^a 27 parishes totalling just over 70,000 acres in agricultural use.

^b The Z test standardises the data into a normal distribution format and results in column 3 with a Z statistic which, when using the appropriate statistical table, provides a p value (column 4). This shows the probability that the observed differences in proportionate change between the measures for England and Wales and the Berkshire Downs occurred by chance alone. In column 5 the level of statistical significance for each line comparison is shown; * indicates where it is statistically significant at the level of less than 5%.

^c Excluding the occupier or principal partner and his wife, groundsmen and gardeners.

^d Includes regular part-time workers.

Sources: Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Agricultural Statistics, 1921 and 1938* (1922 and 1939); TNA, MAF 68/3014 and MAF 68/3859.

VII

As stated in Section I, there was comment that farms in the period went to rack and ruin, with maintenance being suspended, resulting in a worsening in the appearance of the countryside. Scrub and bushes such as gorse and juniper were said to take over grazing land and land was abandoned to the rabbits. Indeed, some said they were the most profitable crop!⁴⁸ The downland of southern England was said to be particularly badly affected, and was likened to a desert with the Berkshire Downs being likely to be at the extreme end of the phenomenon.⁴⁹ But, how can these various assertions of dereliction be tested? It is an especially problematic issue as the official land use data derived from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries' annual June census did not have a category called 'scrub'; the nearest such land use category is defined as 'rough grazing'.

In an attempt to look for changes in the level of scrub over time on the Berkshire Downs for the study period, the use of contemporary aerial photography was investigated. It was found that the National Monuments Record (NMR) of English Heritage at Swindon had a substantial collection of oblique aerial photographs taken during the 1920s and 1930s by either Major Allen or O. G. S. Crawford for the purpose of recording cropmarks and sites such as ring ditches or earthworks; the former were filmed in June to September and the latter in the winter when the sun is lower in the sky and produces longer shadows. As a result, even though the photographs are old, scrub can usually be clearly seen. These photographs are available as an open-access, browsable collection, filed in boxes by their Ordnance Survey grid reference number, each covering an area of 100 hectares.

The study area comprises, in broad terms, 500 one kilometre OS grid squares (50,000 hectares or 123,550 acres); 94 of these squares have prints available from the 1920s and 1930s in the NMR oblique aerial photographic collection. Of these 94 squares, 10 had prints from different times in the study period and, of these, in six separate 100 hectare (247 acre) squares there is clear visual evidence of an increase in scrub over time.⁵⁰ However, whilst this is good evidence of some increase in scrub at six separate places on the Berkshire Downs at various times during the study period, it is probably not appropriate to arithmetically 'raise' this evidence to try to make an estimate of the likely areal extent of the phenomenon at the end of the study period.

To try to explore this issue further, numerous images in the archives at MERL were closely examined to see if there was any visual evidence of scrub existence during the study period. Some 59 images of farming scenes on the Berkshire Downs in this period were identified, extracted and scrutinised for this purpose and only six possibilities were found. Two of these are reproduced as Figures 4 and 5 here. However, it should be emphasized that these images, all from the Eric Guy collection, only show the existence of scrub at the particular point of

⁴⁸ J. Cherrington, 'Introduction', p. xi; G. M. Craig, J. L. Jollans and A. Korbey (eds), *The case for agriculture: an independent assessment* (1986), pp. 101–2; J. Martin, 'The wild rabbit: plague, policies and pestilence in England and Wales, 1931–1955', *AgHR* 58 (2010), pp. 259–60; Perren, *Agriculture in depression*, pp. 49–50; Whetham, *British Farming*, pp. 5–9.

⁴⁹ J. Brown, *The rural world of Eric Guy* (2008), p. 15; Perren, *Agriculture in depression*, p. 46; Smith, *Ecology*, p. 407; M. Soper, *Years of change* (1995), pp. 44–5; Thomas, 'Agriculture in the south', p. 12.

⁵⁰ OS kilometre squares: SU2477, SU2986, SU3282, SU3884, SU3984 and SU5486.



FIGURE 4. A moveable poultry ark on the Berkshire Downs with scrub in the background near Aldworth in the mid-1930s. From the Eric Guy Collection, MERL, University of Reading, MERL DX 289 PH1/840.



FIGURE 5. Scrub on the Berkshire Downs near Aldworth in the mid-1930s. From the Eric Guy Collection, MERL, University of Reading, MERL PDX289 PH1/901.

time when the photographs were taken, and not that scrub was necessarily on the increase.⁵¹ There could also have been some particular on-farm physical or farming systems reason why such scrub was in existence, and that this was not linked to their farms' financial situations at the time.

So, combining the evidence from the aerial photographs from the NMR with those from the MERL collection gives some credence to the suggestion that scrub increased on the Berkshire Downs from 1921–38. There is no evidence though, that whole farms went derelict, just parts of the odd field. This is in contrast to what happened in the depression of the 1880s where changes in a whole farm resulted in a village on the Berkshire Downs, called Snape, becoming derelict as the owner changed the farming system from an arable/sheep system to grass-based sheep 'ranching'. The original farm employed 16 men whereas the latter employed a shepherd only; ironically, by the late 1930s, a new owner had introduced five bail milking herds and 1,000 outdoor pigs onto this grassland and the total number of employees then rose to 20.⁵²

VIII

What about the comparison of the financial performance of farms on the Berkshire Downs with those in England and Wales? It will be remembered from the discussion above, the two measures that are available for both geographical areas are farm sale prices and NFI. Table 4 presents comparable figures for the former. Here it can be seen that for only one of the comparative five-year moving averages presented (1929–33) were the Berkshire Downs figures higher than for those of England and Wales and, for 1928–32, they were the same at £21 per acre. For all the other years, particularly in the period 1921–30, the Berkshire Downs figures were substantially lower than those for England and Wales: between 1922 and 1928 they were less than half. Interestingly, whilst from 1931 prices in England and Wales stabilised, for the Berkshire Downs having risen back again until 1931, they fell again until the end of the study period.

In order to compare NFI per acre for the nation against that for the Berkshire Downs, some calculations and somewhat heroic assumptions are needed. First, the NFI figures for the UK presented in Table 1 for four groups of years over the study period need to be divided by the average total agricultural area for those years from official statistics.⁵³ Then, to obtain equivalent figures for the Berkshire Downs, a series of weighted average calculations had to be performed on the data for the case-study farms in Tables 7 and 8, to allow for the different areas and availability at various times during the study period. The results per acre, in current price terms, are as follows, with each period comparison being shown first for the UK and then for the Berkshire Downs: 1920–23, £2.89, –£1.61; 1924–29, £0.79, –£0.11; 1930–34, £0.71, –£0.78; and 1935–39, £1.29, –£0.20.

⁵¹ MERL photographic collection, P DX289 PH1/16; P DX289 PH1/195b; P DX289 PH1/655; P DX289 PH1/840; P DX289 PH1/901; and P DX289 PH2/4138.

⁵² C. S. Orwin, 'Commodity prices and farming policy', *JRASE* 83 (1922), pp. 9–10; A. D. Hall, *Reconstruction and the land* (1941), pp. 171–3.

⁵³ Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland, *A century of agricultural statistics. Great Britain, 1866–1966* (1968), pp. 91–2; <<http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/dard-statistics/agricultural-statistics/agricultural-census-historical-data-1847-to-date.htm>>.

The comparisons reveal a stark difference in profitability between the 'national' farm and the 16 or so case-study Berkshire Downs farms. Whilst the level of profitability at the national level declined by some 73 per cent from £2.89 per acre in 1920–23 to £0.71 in 1930–34 and then rose by 1939 to £1.29, it was always positive. In contrast, on the Berkshire Downs, between 1920 and 1934 a loss per acre was made and it wasn't until the period 1935–39, when a NFI of £0.20 per acre was obtained, that profitability returned. The poorness of the financial performance on the Berkshire Downs can be further emphasised when two factors are considered. First, the national 'farm' includes large areas of hills and upland in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and northern England, perhaps 40 per cent of the total, areas where it has always been difficult to farm profitably. Second, the Berkshire Downs case-study farms may well have been farmed by people with above average levels of technical and managerial ability as, at that time, few farmers had started to collect the comprehensive financial records necessary to calculate NFI. In other words, whereas the national performance may have been pulled downwards by the large area of marginal land, the Berkshire Downs figures are likely to have been better than those achieved by 'average' farmers in that area.

In 1928 and 1931 the Agricultural Economics Research Institute at the University of Oxford carried out inquiries into the severity of the agricultural recession. They ascertained the number of notices to quit issued by tenants to their landlords and the number of rent reductions obtained. This quantitative data, provided by land agents and chartered surveyors, was supplemented by qualitative material detailing, by county, which types and sizes of rented farm were worst hit and where. In reports on both inquiries, the farmland on the Berkshire Downs received especial mention as to how hard it had been hit by the depression and how difficult landlords were finding the task of keeping their tenants, or indeed, finding new ones to replace those who had quit.⁵⁴

Finally, the basic thesis of this paper – that farming on the Berkshire Downs during the study period was worse hit by the recession than in the country as a whole – needs answering. It has been shown above that farmers on the Berkshire Downs quickly moved out of the traditional arable corn-sheep system and that there was a statistically significant greater rise in the area of permanent pasture and cattle numbers than nationally as less-intensive beef and dairying systems were adopted. Farmland sale prices per acre were considerably lower on the Berkshire Downs than nationally and there is some good evidence that more than the average numbers of tenants there either gave notice to quit, or had rent reductions.

Using data from case-study farms on the Berkshire Downs, it has also been shown that, in comparison, farms nationally in the study period, on average, performed much better in terms of NFI per acre. Indeed, right across 1921–38 they made a positive NFI per acre whereas, on the Berkshire Downs, for three out of the four groups of years analysed in this period, negative NFIs resulted. It has also been argued above that this very poor financial performance might well have been the cause of some dereliction and, a possible rise in the presence of scrub, during the period.

⁵⁴ D. Skilbeck and M. Messer, 'The incidence of notices to quit and rent reductions as an indication of farming conditions', in The Agricultural Economics Society, *Proceedings of conferences held in London, December 12th, 1928, and at Downing College, Cambridge, June 21st–24th, 1929* (1929), pp. 55–6; M. Messer, *The agricultural depression of 1931. Its nature and incidence* (1932), pp. 10, 16 and 17.

Following the above evidence, it can be concluded with some certainty that farmers on the Berkshire Downs during 1921–38 were harder hit by the recession than were those across the country in general. Taking Paul Brassley's point that the inter-war years were 'a mixture of decline and regeneration' for the industry, it is clear that there were innovative and inventive farmers on the Berkshire Downs using modern methods, for example, of producing milk and rearing poultry for both meat and eggs. In order to do this, they needed a degree of faith for miles of barbed wire fences needed erecting as well as wells sunk for water.⁵⁵ Indeed, most of them were employing one or more of Tony Giles' four ways of maintaining or increasing their profit, as outlined in the introductory section above, in order to withstand the recession.⁵⁶ However, for most farmers there, it was a difficult time with, to draw on John McNerney's words, a lot of 'coping' with what the policy and market situation had faced them with, as well as 'hoping' that things would improve.⁵⁷ Which, of course, was what happened with the advent of the War and the urgent necessity for an increase in home food production.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Brassley, 'British farming', pp. 198–9.

⁵⁶ Giles, 'No fixed address', p. 390.

⁵⁷ McNerney, *Economic adjustment*, pp. 3, 11 and 15.

⁵⁸ H. Newby, *Country life: a social history of rural England* (1987), p. 173; Whetham, *British Farming*, pp. 19–20.