

Letters to the Editor

OVER-POPULATION

SIR,—In two recent works, Mrs Thirsk's *English Peasant Farming*, and Dr Hoskins's *Midland Peasant*, it has been argued that there was over-population in Tudor and earlier times in some parts of rural England. This argument is one that must have aroused the greatest scepticism in more minds than mine. It seems almost impossible that there should be over-population in any rural district when the total population of the whole country was only about four millions, and wide areas still remained open to occupation.

Leaving that aside, Mrs Thirsk's story indicates that the Fenland farmers owned more cattle than they could conveniently feed rather than that there were more people than could maintain themselves, but this part of the question is not so easily answered as that in Dr Hoskins's book.

On p. 64 he states that each of the three open fields at Wigston contained approximately 900 acres, while on p. 62 he states that the pressure of population was acute. The cultivation was apparently the ordinary rotation of winter crops (mainly wheat and rye), spring crops, and fallow. There was therefore one field of 900 acres every year under winter corn for human eating, and one field of 900 acres under spring corn for human drink and animal feed. The third 900 acres was fallow. Each field included some ley strips; a generous, possibly excessive, allowance would be 200 acres. In the field under winter wheat and rye there would be 700 acres, and this would be the area under these crops every year. I think 200 acres of ley in each field is probably more than there actually was, because that would make a total of 600 acres ley in the three fields, but only Dr Hoskins could say precisely.

In the period under discussion Walter of Henley estimated only three times the seed as yield, but the anonymous *Hosebondrie* of about the same date recommends $1\frac{1}{2}$ quarters maslin or wheat seed on five acres, or 2.4

bushels an acre. The return was the greater in volume as the proportion of rye in the mixture was increased. Equal parts gave six times the seed; wheat alone only five times, the maslin yield being 14.4 bushels, the other 12. These estimated yields are optimistic for the time. Walter of Henley himself thinks wheat at times only returned three times a seeding of 2 bushels. In a favourable year the yield was somewhere between the two, and may perhaps have been as much as 10 bushels average for clean wheat or maslin of one mix or another. Wheat alone might be less; maslin might be more. Ten bushels is not, I think, excessive. On the 700 acres of the field under winter corn some 7,000 bushels of grain for human food would then be harvested. If the yield was lower, and the area of the field under crop was 800 acres or more—as it may very well have been—the result would not have been very different. There would have been getting on for 7,000 bushels to dispose of.

From this gross harvest the seed for the following year had to be saved, between 2 and 2.5 bushels an acre, or one-quarter or one-fifth of the whole. Estimating on the maximum seed requirement of $2\frac{1}{2}$ bushels, some 5,250 bushels were left to feed the population for a year. The maximum population stated by Dr Hoskins was 120 households in A.D. 1377 (p. 60). It was often much less. Taking Dr Hoskins's factor of 3.8 adults to each household, a total of 456 persons is obtained.

In the numerous writings of the eighteenth century dealing with the production of corn it is usually assumed that the healthy labourer consumed a quarter of wheat per annum. It seems doubtful whether rural dietetic habits had changed very much during the intervening 400 years, and reference to Maitland (*Domesday Book and Beyond*, p. 441) suggests the same bread requirement. The production of the wheat field at Wigston would therefore, on the basis of 10 bushels' yield on 700 acres, supply 525 persons; on the basis of 8 bushels only 385, and there would come a strain.

However, Maitland, dealing with the country as a whole, not a particular village, suggests that 2 acres per head were required to produce the bread and beer each individual consumed. One acre of this at Wigston was in the winter corn (wheat and rye) field, the other in the spring corn (barley, oats, etc.) field. If therefore the calculation is made on this basis 700 acres in the winter corn field would supply bread for 700 persons. Maitland mentions that some wheat and rye might be made into beer: he does not mention that some of the barley and oats might be consumed as bread.

If I have been over-generous in granting 200 acres of each of the three fields to be under ley, and there was really a much less amount, as I think likely, the position of the villagers would be by so much improved, and the problem of over-population less immediate. If there was so much, or indeed any, it was a reserve of land that could have been broken up for crops as the population increased. I feel that over-population at Wigston is "not proven."

G. E. FUSSELL

Mrs Thirsk writes: I have always tried to avoid using the term 'over-population' when writing of sixteenth-century England, since it is liable to conjure up a picture of modern China or parts of East Africa, where peasant holdings have become so much subdivided that they only support a family in conditions of semi-starvation. By "pressure of population on the land" in the sixteenth century I mean the problem that arose all over England, and was not simply confined to the fens, when the population of a township rose while its land remained fixed in area. It was a common phenomenon for a village of thirty households to increase its population to forty families within a matter of two or three generations. The additional householders, if they did not get their living as craftsmen or shopkeepers—and few people in the villages depended on this source of income alone—had to find a living on the land. Every one felt the pinch when more and more stock were pastured on the common grazings and more of the waste

was taken in and used to extend the arable land. To meet this situation various devices were adopted for using the land more economically. In the less congested parishes, economies were effected by turning unregulated wastes into regulated common pastures, in others by reducing the stint of animals previously agreed upon. In the more populous parishes, pressure on the land led to ley farming, less frequent fallowing in the open fields, and enclosure. There is no doubt that pressure of population on the land was the second agrarian problem of the sixteenth century, the first being that examined by Professor R. H. Tawney in *The Agrarian Problem of the Sixteenth Century* (1912), namely the effect of the price revolution on rural society.

Dr Hoskins writes: Like Dr Thirsk, I try to avoid the use of the term 'over-population'. In my book I refer to "pressure on the land" during the thirteenth and the early fourteenth centuries, and again towards the end of the sixteenth century. Even so, it is well known that there were great variations in the density of population between one part of England and another in these periods, and it was quite possible for the east midlands, for example, to be *relatively* over-populated and for other regions, such as most of northern England, to be *relatively* under-populated. There can be little doubt about the growing pressure on the land in England generally by the end of the sixteenth century, in the sense that tenants were seeking farms rather than landlords seeking tenants. I would have thought that both Dr Thirsk's book and my own showed this pressure at work in various parts of the east midlands at this period and later.

Mr Fussell's ingenious calculations about the production of bread-corn seem to me to be beside the point. By pressure on the land I meant the relationship between the number of farms available in a given parish or region and the number of people seeking farms, not whether people were getting enough to eat. The pressure of a growing population in most parts of England was aggravated by the

increasing tendency towards the engrossing and consolidation of farms. In the parish which I chose for study I showed that by the middle of the eighteenth century only one-third of the families occupied any land; two-thirds of the village population occupied no land at all but had to buy their food with their wages. In these circumstances calculations about the total output of food from a given area have little relevance to the argument.

I agree with Mr Fussell that "over-population at Wigston is 'not proven'." Economists will know that it is nearly impossible to prove that over-population exists at a given time and place, however one defines it. In my introduction (p. xv) I myself said that "one might almost have called the economic history of Wigston a study in over-population, but the materials are lacking to make such a study completely convincing." That is all that Mr Fussell is really saying, but for the wrong reasons.

FARM INVENTORIES AND PEASANTS

SIR,—Mr R. Trow-Smith in his review of Dr J. Thirsk's book *English Peasant Farming* (A.H.R. vi, p. 57) suggests that inventories of "peasants'" goods contain a great mass of incidental information such as: descriptions of farm implements, lists of buildings which housed them, the colours of cattle, and the age ranges of ewes and wethers in the flock. He complains that there is "little here (in the book) of such things." Can it be because he happens to have selected just the details on which farm inventories are unhappily silent or unreliable? I have examined and analysed a considerable number of farm inventories for this region of Sussex (see *Sussex Arch. Coll.*, xciii) and I have found little to support his ideas. It would be interesting to know on which part of England Mr Trow-Smith bases his notion and the number of inventories he examined. Here the implements are simply "ploughs, harrows, dung-pots, yokes, and harness." The farm buildings, many of which survive from the seventeenth century at least, are rarely mentioned and then only as "wheat in the barn" or "dung in the gate." I have yet

to see a reference to colour of cattle. The sheep, pigs, and young stock of all ages are usually grouped, e.g. "100 sheep and lambs." In general the livestock figures are valuable because they give some idea of the relative amounts of draught oxen to horses, cattle to sheep, which happened to be on the farm at death, and when used in bulk they may provide useful comparisons with other soil regions and other periods. But the young stock figures, if they happen to be given, are usually hopelessly ambiguous and inaccurately defined, e.g. "1 sow and 5 pigs" tells us something, but "15 pigs" is not much use because we do not know the amount of breeding stock. Livestock value was all that concerned the appraiser and the name was simply a peg on which to hang that value. A rough definition such as "a plough" or "the sheep" was all that was necessary in appraising a man's goods and chattels. Occasional amplifications are very welcome, but one or two stray inventories provide wholly unconvincing evidence from which to generalize. Probate inventories are not 4th-of-June returns from which anyone can produce nice tidy statistics. They are an invaluable source of agrarian information, as two scholars of great experience in their use, Drs Hoskins and Thirsk, have shown. Both understand their merits and their limitations.

Talking of peasants, can the authorities agree and define exactly what they mean by an English peasant? The O.E.D. does not help. If ten interested persons were asked to define an English peasant, I suggest there would be at least ten different and vague answers. Yeomen, husbandmen large and small, part-time tradesmen-smallholders such as millers and molecatchers, bond and free, are they all peasants? Was the parson using his glebe a holy peasant? Were the town-dwelling butchers and maltsters who farmed, urban peasants? By all means let us make use of the word, if there is no other, but let us know exactly what it means.

Yours truly,

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