

Excerpts from Mingay, Gordon. 'Agriculture and Rural Life'. *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Ed. H. T. Dickinson. Cornwall: Blackwell, 2002. 141-157.

"Agriculture was by far the largest occupation of England in the eighteenth century. In 1700 it is estimated to have occupied directly 45 per cent of a population of 5 million, i.e., some 2.25 million people. A century later this number had grown, though the proportion was considerably less: some 36 per cent were then employed of a much larger population, something over 3 million out of more than 8.5 million people. While continuing to shrink as a proportion of the total, the numbers in farming continued to rise until the 1850s, when it was still the largest occupational group.

The remarkable achievement of agricultural progress in the eighteenth century was to feed, with a smaller proportion of the total, a non-agricultural population that expanded from an estimated 3.75 million to about 5.5 million, and this at a time when imports, though growing, accounted for only a small proportion of total food supply. In addition to food, of course, agriculture was producing increased quantities of important raw materials used in both country crafts and urban industries, such as timber, wool, hides and tallow (for candles) as well as dyestuffs and medicinal plants."

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"In general, however, the agricultural structure was made up of three main elements, landowners, farmers and farmworkers, each with different functions and very different incomes. By the later eighteenth century independent landowning farmers were in a minority, though their numbers varied from one district to another. The bulk of the land, perhaps 80 or 90 per cent of it, was in the hands of great landowners and gentry. Many of them, it is true, kept a home farm for the convenience of having a supply of fresh food ready to hand for their large households, but generally they did not go in for farming for an income. They preferred to leave this risky and troublesome business to tenant farmers, who, while often possessing some land of their own, rented additional acreage from landlords. This enabled them to employ their resources more profitably: contemporaries believed that farmers earned as profit a third of the value of their output, another third going to meet the costs of farming, and the other to the landlord in rent. Landowners, however, rarely received in rent more than about 3 per cent of the value of their land after allowing for outgoings, a factor which made farmers more willing to rent land than to own it.

Small farmers were engaged in various kinds of mixed and more specialized farming, and there were also large numbers of smallholders and 'husbandmen' who made a living, part-time or full-time, by dairying on common or rented land, by growing vegetables and fruit, or raising poultry. They were certainly more independent than the labourers, who generally had no land except perhaps access to a common, and who relied mainly on their wages.

The labourers fell into two main groups: those, mainly young and unmarried, who were farm servants, living in with the farmer and hired and paid by the year; and those who lived out in cottages and were paid by the day or at piecework rates for particular tasks. The latter, the day-labourers, were clearly less secure and had to give up their cottage when changing master; although in practice they often worked for years for the same farmer, when it was a common practice for farm servants to move on each year. Sometimes farm servants who saved their wages were able in time to set up as small farmers, the farmer helping them to begin by running their sheep with his own flock. Farm servants were more commonly found in northern and western areas where pastoral farming was the rule, day-labourers were scarce, and a regular workforce was required to look after the livestock. There were also numbers of semi-independent workers who made a living by carting coal, wood and building materials, and by 'higgling' or dealing in small quantities of poultry, eggs and vegetables, or by offering some special skill such as a knowledge of draining, hedging, well-digging or mole-catching.

Most farmers had no leases and, formally, little security. In practice, however, for reasons of securing votes and gaining popularity, landlords generally kept their rents low and revised them only at long intervals, and they were concerned to help their better tenants through difficult years. The last thing a landlord wanted was to have to take a farm 'in hand', for the losses arising from having to provide himself the stock and supervision of a farm could be heavy."

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"The 1730s and 1740s, with the exception of the very bad year of 1740, were particularly marked by low grain prices, especially in the midlands. Landowners were obliged to intervene to keep their tenants on the farms by accepting unusually high arrears of rent and by giving assistance with payment of taxes and other outlays normally considered the tenant's responsibility, such as purchases of seed and repairs. Even so, tenants threw up farms and numbers absconded, leaving accumulated arrears unpaid. Landlords had to write off bad debts and tried to encourage their remaining tenants to carry on by offering rent reductions and improvements to buildings. The agricultural depression in some grain areas appears to have resulted from the bountiful harvests of the time coupled with only a small increase in demand except for the growing market among the swelling population of London.

The economic climate began to change after 1750 when the general increase in consumers' numbers tended to outstrip agricultural production and harvests were less plentiful. At the same time transport improvements gave better access to ports and growing towns. Even so, exports of grain continued, though on a diminishing scale, until the 1790s. Further experimentation with livestock and advanced cropping systems were encouraged by more profitable markets, and landlords continued, as earlier, to improve the efficiency of their farms by expanding the holdings of the better tenants at the expense of the incompetent. The most remarkable feature of the second half of the century, however, was the reorganization of a substantial proportion of the farmland by means of enclosure.

During the first sixty years of the century landlords' farm rents were generally low and suffered downward pressure in the 1730s and 1740s. Subsequently, however, following the rise in prices, rents began to rise. Throughout the century there was a marked difference between the rent paid for land in open fields, generally some 6–8 shillings a year per acre, and that already enclosed, 10–15 shillings. Rich pasture yielded even higher rents. Landlords kept their woodlands in hand, to be cut and replanted at regular intervals and the wood sold to dealers. Timber was an important source of revenue on many estates and if minerals were present landlords themselves exploited the mines or leased them out to entrepreneurs. Quite often there were also ironworks and other enterprises, including brick-kilns, lime-kilns and even textile works. Those landlords who took an interest in farming techniques used the home farm for experiments and brought their tenants round to see for themselves the effects of new rotations, more quickly fattened livestock and more efficient implements.

The rise in rents in the later decades of the century was not due solely to higher prices, though many landlords took advantage of the more prosperous times to revise rentals which in some cases had been unchanged for as long as a century. Where owners made permanent improvements, such as rebuilding a farmhouse, providing a new barn or cowshed, and installing more effective drainage of wet soils and flood protection, the rents would be raised to obtain a reasonable return on the expenditure. The largest rent increases, however, followed on the enclosure of open fields and commons when not only were common rights abolished and the farms made more compact, but former waste land worth cultivating was incorporated in the farms. The post-enclosure rents varied with location and the nature of the soils, but in some cases might show a doubling or trebling of the former value.

Rising rents enabled landowners to live on a more luxurious scale and helped to pay for extensions to the house, enlarged and newly landscaped parks, and such extravagances as private

menageries, costly follies and newly built ruins. Entertaining, sport and political activity also benefited from the new affluence, and dowries and legacies reached dizzy heights. From surplus income some owners financed an entrepreneurial role beyond the bounds of the estate, putting money into turnpikes and canals, river navigations and harbour improvements. The transport enterprises were usually local ones which gave better access to distant markets for tenants' produce and the owner's mines. And, though to a lesser extent, the landlords' example was followed by the wealthier farmers. It has been calculated that one-third of all the investment made in eighteenth-century canals came from landowners. Much of this investment affected nascent industrial areas. Of course, not all owners enjoyed the same opportunities or showed the same enterprise, and some of them opposed river navigations and turnpikes where the effects were likely to damage the local markets enjoyed by their tenants. But generally the need for better transport conditions was widely recognized, as may be seen also in the newly constructed parish roads that accompanied many enclosures. Landowners' enthusiasm was encouraged by the social and business connections they had with local merchants and industrialists, sometimes tempting them to invest in overseas trading and shipping ventures.

Landowners' industrial and transport investments, and to a lesser extent those of farmers too, were locally very significant. They were particularly important in the exploitation of coal, the essential material for the new iron industry as well as the new source of power, the steam engine. The advance of areas such as the Black Country, the West Riding, Lancashire and Newcastle hinged on coal, and it formed the main cargo of most northern canals, rivers and ports. The willingness of landowners to invest, if often on a very limited scale, was a major factor in fostering the new economy of coal, iron and textiles that was to dominate the next century. In seeking private profit the landed interest advanced the industrial age."

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"A major feature of eighteenth-century improvement was the reorganization of a large part of the farmland by enclosure of open fields, commons and waste lands. This was a process already in train in previous centuries, but in the eighteenth century enclosure by private act of parliament was added to existing procedures. There were then three main forms of enclosure: the piecemeal fencing in of small acreages, a gradual process which over the years nibbled away at the fields; larger-scale enclosure by agreement among the owners; and compulsory enclosure by the authority of private acts. It is not known how much land was affected by the first two forms, but in some areas that enclosed by agreement was considerable. Parliamentary enclosure, which became the favoured procedure after about 1750, is estimated to have affected some 24 per cent of the total area of England and Wales, though geographically it was very unevenly spread. [...]

The object of enclosure was to abolish the remaining open fields (which in some parishes were small in area) and terminate the common rights governing the use of the land. The commons were brought into the farmlands, together with any waste lands that were worth cultivating or could be exploited for minerals. The result was the creation of a new pattern of fields and closes divided by hedges or walls, with the occupiers having sole access to the land and free to cultivate it as they wished."