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THE GREAT DEPRESSION OF ENGLISH AGRICULTURE 1873-1896

By T. W. FLETCHER

I

THE nature and extent of the Great Depression of trade and industry during the last quarter of the nineteenth century have been argued for many years. In contrast, the existence of a great depression in agriculture was, and is, universally accepted, and farmers' sufferings have been wept over by generations of mourners. 'Since 1862 the tide of agricultural prosperity had ceased to flow; after 1874 it turned and rapidly ebbed'—Ernle's splendid narrative leaves us in no doubt as to the severity of depression.¹ Venn, discussing the supply of gold and the price level, believed agriculture to have suffered more than most industries, 'being plunged indeed into the abyss'.² The general opinion is perhaps best summarized by Halévy; 'if the position of industry was doubtful, about agriculture there could be no doubt. It was in an advanced state of decay'.³

The evidence for this sort of textbook generalization is of two kinds, the statistical, with the Gazette price of wheat and Sauerbeck's food index illustrating the fall in farm prices and the Agricultural Returns mirroring output, and the descriptive, which leans heavily on Ernle and the proceedings of the two Royal Commissions of 1879-82 and 1894-7. Additional evidence, but playing little or no part in the genesis of this orthodox view, is the Schedule A assessments of the Inland Revenue Board and the recent work on rent by Mr Rhee and on output by Dr Ojala.⁴ It is the view of the present writer that much of this evidence is biased in that most commentators have adopted, albeit unconsciously, an attitude towards agriculture and consequently towards the Great Depression that is inappropriate and misleading in the economic climate of Victorian, and later, England.

The depression is usually dated 1873-96, which fairly coincides with the turning points of both the wheat price and Sauerbeck's index. This seems satisfactory until the question is asked, how important was wheat to the English farmer and what does Sauerbeck's index measure? According to Dr Ojala, who does not underestimate its importance, the wheat crop contributed 13 per cent of the gross output at current prices of the agriculture of the U.K. in the period 1867-76 and this fell to four per cent by 1894-1903.⁵

¹ R. E. Prothero (later Lord Ernle), *English Farming Past and Present* (4th. ed. 1927), p. 374.

² J. A. Venn, *The Foundations of Agricultural Economics* (2nd. ed. 1923), p. 474.

³ E. Halévy, *A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century* - V (2nd. ed. 1951), pp. 293-4.

⁴ H. A. Rhee, *The Rent of Agricultural Land in England and Wales* (Central Landowners Association, 1946); E. M. Ojala, *Agriculture and Economic Progress* (1952).

⁵ Computed from Ojala, *op. cit.* Table XVI, p. 208.

An estimate for England alone shews percentages of 22 and seven.¹ Sauerbeck's index, from the point of view of the commodities and prices selected, is probably a better measure of price changes of foods entering international trade than it is of the products of English farms; for example, the whole of English dairying is represented by one price series, that of Friesland butter, out of 19, all equally weighted, and 14 of these series relate to import not home product prices.² A further drawback is that the weighting remains unaltered throughout the period and by the eighteen nineties is ludicrously unrepresentative of the output from English farms.

Neither the coincidence of Sauerbeck's vegetable food index with the curve of the wheat price nor the relatively small part played by wheat in farm output would matter so much if changes in the price of wheat accurately reflected changes in agricultural prices generally or if Sauerbeck's import prices were representative of prices received by English livestock producers. But neither of these suppositions is tenable: the price of wheat notoriously fell by more than other cereal prices and very much more than livestock prices (except wool), and although home livestock prices are neither abundant nor easily found, such price series as can be constructed exhibit a smaller fall during the Great Depression than the respective import series.³ On the output side, to judge by the *Agricultural Returns*, there is little evidence of any contraction of production, except in the case of wheat and, to a much smaller extent, of barley; on the contrary the acreage of oats, fruit and vegetables, and the numbers of most categories of livestock increased significantly.⁴

Thus the most widely used statistical evidence of agricultural depression appears, on examination, to relate mainly to the price and acreage changes of wheat. A closer look at the Great Depression seems called for; it is proposed to begin with the general demand and supply situation and pass on to a consideration of the nature of English agriculture and of the contemporary scene.

II

The demand situation facing English farmers was encouraging. Between 1851 and 1871 the population of England increased at the rate of 1.3 per cent per annum; between 1871 and 1901 the annual rate of growth was 1.5 per cent, or, in absolute terms, whereas in the twenty years of the 'Golden Age' less than five millions were added to the population, in the thirty years covering the Great Depression an additional 10 million mouths appeared. Again, between 1851 and 1871 real wages rose by less than one per cent per annum; between 1871 and 1901 the rate was approximately two per cent.⁵ The contrast is the more marked in that there was little change for a decade and a half after 1851 and the 'take-off' into significant growth of real wages occurred as late as the half dozen years after 1868. Thus with population increasing faster than during the Golden Age and accompanied for the first time by a marked upward surge in real wages the aggregate demand situation for food was exceedingly favourable for the producer.

¹ See Appendix.

² Sauerbeck's food index, base 1867-77, is an unweighted average of 19 price indices, eight of them forming his vegetable food index, seven his animal food index, and four covering sugar, tea, and coffee; details can be found in the *Journal of the Statistical Society*, XLIX (1886), 592-648.

³ See p. 319 below.

⁴ The numbers of cattle, pigs, and farm horses in England increased by 22, 18, and 19 per cent respectively; the number of sheep fell by 18 per cent, between 1868-71 and 1894-8.

⁵ W. T. Layton, *An Introduction to the Study of Prices* (1912), p. 150.

It is a commonplace that with rising income civilized man prefers to purchase the more expensive and appetizing proteins rather than the cheaper starches. And when, as during the Great Depression, the price of bread and cereals falls by more than the price of animal products, a growing fraction of income becomes available for expenditure on protein. Contemporary references to the changing pattern of food consumption abound and were neatly paraphrased by Graham in 1899 in his wellknown phrase, 'the sort of man who had bread and cheese for his dinner 40 years ago now demands a chop'.¹

The effect on English farmers of this changing pattern of demand was naturally to stimulate the production of meat, milk, and dairy products at the expense of wheat and potatoes. Not that this shift began in the seventies. Since 1846 the price of meat and dairy products rose slowly relative to the price of wheat, but the prophesied flood of cereal imports was unexpectedly restricted until the seventies; it was in this decade that a revolutionary change in relative livestock and cereal prices began to be observed.²

Demand forms only one blade of the economist's 'abhorred shears': on the supply side a prominent feature of the period was the growth in food imports. The quantity of wheat and flour imported into the U.K. increased by 90 per cent, that of meat by 300 per cent, and that of butter and cheese by 110 per cent between 1871-5 and 1896-1900; the repercussions on home output were not, however, identical.

To judge from estimates of total supply available for consumption in the U.K., demand for wheat increased more slowly than population. Foreign supplies were plentiful following the opening up of virgin territory abroad and the fall in rail and shipping rates, and the price at English ports fell drastically. Wheat was to all intents a homogeneous product, it sold on the classic international wheat market, and the price received by the English farmer was a direct function of the world price; it fell from 56s. od. a quarter in 1867-71 to 27s. 3d. in 1894-8³ and was accompanied by a decline in the English acreage from over three to one and three quarter million acres.

The situation was different in the case of meat. Demand grew faster than population, and home output rose by some 10 per cent in spite of a severe thinning of the country's sheep flocks by outbreaks of disease in the years 1879-81. Imports were generally inferior in quality to the home product and priced accordingly, and price differentials widened over the period of the Great Depression.⁴ Imports of butter and cheese, already considerable, increased further to satisfy the growth in consumer demand which, in face of the attractions of the lucrative liquid milk trade, could not be supplied by English farmers. Most foreign supplies on the English market fetched lower

¹ P. A. Graham, *The Revival of English Agriculture* (1899), p. 9.

² Early advocates of a change from corn to meat, dairy and green crop production include J. Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850-51* (1852), pp. 483-7 *passim* and G. Beasley, *A Report on the State of Agriculture in Lancashire* (Preston, 1849), who argued 'upon the presumption that permanently low prices of grain will in future be established' (p. 67).

³ *Gazette* prices. The period 1867-71 is chosen, whenever possible, as more representative of pre-depression prices than say 1870-6 which covers the marked cyclical peak of the early seventies; 1894-8 is taken as the end of the depression in the trough of the nineties.

⁴ For example, the price of best English beef at Smithfield between 1867-71 and 1894-8 fell by 11 per cent compared with imported fresh beef which fell by 23 per cent. Imported mutton was even less competitive; first quality light-weight mutton and lamb rose by eight per cent as against a fall in average import prices of some 30 per cent (*Agricultural Returns*).

prices than the home product and, as with meat, the price difference widened.¹ The responsible factor, apart from quality, was undoubtedly the price of liquid milk which, immune from foreign competition, shewed little or no overall fall. To generalize in terms of grave import competition reducing agricultural prices is inadmissible against a background of generally falling prices. Some farm prices fell, others did not; some fell in the seventies, others in the eighties and nineties.

A fourth group of imports was that comprising maize, coarse grains and oilcakes. In that the quantity imported doubled between 1867-71 and 1894-8, during which time the average price fell by about 40 per cent, whilst livestock numbers increased by only about 10 per cent,² a significant increase in productivity is suggested, in the form, for example, of higher yields per cow. The question is prompted; what changes occurred in the output of English agriculture during this period?

III

The one published estimate that provides sufficient data to check the various series contributing to the final sum is Dr Ojala's, and it is unfortunate that it is computed for the U.K. as a whole, so divergent were the interests and experiences of farmers in the four countries concerned, but the difficulty of allocating imports within the U.K. and the paucity of figures relating to Anglo-Irish trade may well justify Dr Ojala's decision in this respect. It is otherwise with some of his price series which rely overmuch on Sauerbeck's import prices, in particular for meat and dairy output. Using Dr Ojala's basic data but substituting home for import prices, a revised index of the U.K.'s gross farm output at current prices moves from 100 in 1867-9 to 108 in 1870-6 to 90 in 1894-1903.³ An estimate for England falls from 100 in 1867-71 to 87 in 1894-8.⁴

A net output calculation to determine the margin of farmers' profits is hazardous, in that small opposed movements of gross output and total costs squeeze or magnify the margin severely; nevertheless the subtraction may be attempted for the U.K. Deducting from the revised gross output figures for 1867-76 and 1894-1903 Dr Ojala's costs—to which must be added 'rent' and 'wages etc.' derived from Mr Bellerby's estimates—the total net income at current prices of U.K. farmers declined from £85.4 million to £79 million, a fall of some 7.5 per cent.⁵ In view of the predominance of imports in farm costs it is impossible to assign a figure to English farmers alone, but their fall in income was perhaps greater than in the U.K. as a whole, because of the

¹ Sauerbeck's best imported Friesland butter fell in price by 22 per cent between 1867-71 and 1894-8; Lancashire farm butter by about 13 per cent. Cheese imports declined in price by over 20 per cent; best Lancashire and Cheshire by some 10 per cent. (For Lancashire prices see my forthcoming article 'Lancashire Livestock Farming During the Great Depression' in *British Agricultural History Review*.)

² In terms of Livestock Units, which provide a method of adding different categories of livestock standardized in terms of feed requirements; see *Rations for Livestock*, Ministry of Agriculture, Bulletin No. 48.

³ Dr Ojala's estimates are for the groups of years 1867-9, 1870-6, 1877-85, 1886-93, 1894-1903.

⁴ For details see Appendix.

⁵ See J. R. Bellerby, *Agriculture and Industry Relative Income* (1956), Table 1, p. 56. These farmers' net income figures are of the same order of magnitude as those shewn by Dr Ojala (less Mr Bellerby's rent and wages), but are significantly larger than those computed by Mr Bellerby.

greater importance of wheat. Wales, Ireland and Scotland were predominantly livestock farming areas. It would seem, however, that although English farmers as a group did not, as did farm labourers,¹ manage to augment their money incomes during the Great Depression, although their real incomes appreciated, they did not suffer to the same extent as landowners, to judge by the fall in gross rents.² But in all these cases crude average figures mask crucial differences. The contrast between the movement of wages, rents, and profits in arable and livestock counties is noticeable. In the northern counties wages rose by some 17 per cent between 1867–71 and 1894–8; in the eastern counties the gain of the seventies was lost by the mid-nineties.³ The experiences of landowners were more extreme; for example, the earl of Derby's Fylde rents, which rose by 18 per cent between 1870–1 and 1896, may be compared with those of the Cambridgeshire estates cited by Mr Rhee which declined by 35 per cent between the same dates.⁴

Profits are not directly measurable but output changes are. At constant 1894–8 prices, arable output declined from 1867–71 by about five per cent, livestock output increased by some 20 per cent; using 1867–71 prices the changes shew as –9 and +18 per cent, respectively. The fall in gross output, at current prices, is entirely accounted for by the decline of wheat, and if the gross output sum be divided into its two components, crops and livestock, the distinction is clear; whilst arable output declined from £65 million to £41 million, livestock output increased from £64 million to £71 million. On the eve of depression arable output equalled that of livestock; by the mid-nineties it was only three fifths its value. Wheat is pre-eminent in 1870; it accounts for nearly a half of total arable output and over a fifth of gross output, and equals in value beef and mutton together. By the mid-nineties wheat accounts for little over a sixth of the diminished arable output and has been surpassed not only by dairy produce, beef, mutton, and pigmeat severally but is rapidly being overhauled by poultry.⁵ Thus, whilst livestock farmers increased their quantum of output appreciably and even significantly raised its value, wheat growers suffered the brunt of the price fall and cut back their acreage severely.

There are a number of considerations relevant to such a gross and net output computation. Firstly, helped by the greater freedom of cropping achieved by the tenant farmer during the period, an increasing proportion of cereal growers sold oats, hay, and straw off the farm as feed for non-farm horses the numbers of which in England may well have increased by as much as 50 per cent, although no census returns were collected after 1872.⁶ Fertility was raised and yields increased on the shrinking arable acreage by the greater supplies of

¹ Whose wages on average rose by 11 per cent; see A. Wilson Fox, 'Agricultural Wages in England and Wales During the Last Fifty Years', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, LXIV (1903).

² See Rhee, *op. cit.* Table II, pp. 44–6. Mr Rhee's rent series are heavily weighted by rents from the corn growing counties and thus probably overestimate the national average fall in rents.

³ Wilson Fox, *loc. cit.*

⁴ Lancs. R.O., DDK (Fylde Rents); Rhee, *op. cit.*

⁵ See Appendix.

⁶ Dr Ojala's estimate shews an insignificant increase in non-farm horses in G.B. during the Great Depression. The only available census figures are for Ireland, where the non-farm horses almost doubled in number. In that the population of England increased by roughly 50 per cent, as did both the volume of trade and of railway freight, an equivalent increase in the number of non-farm horses seems not improbable. For the numbers of non-farm horses 1831–72 inclusive, see *Report from the S.C. of the House of Lords on Horses*, H.C. 325 of 1873; it was called to investigate the 'alleged scarcity of horses in this country'.

town manure available, the growing numbers of farm livestock, the larger manurial residues from the growing import of feeding stuffs, and the increasing import of fertilizer.

Secondly, there were changes in the quality of products and in the relative quantities sold by farmers of the several qualities of a single product, themselves changing in relative price, as exemplified in the shift from wether mutton to lamb that is apparent from an analysis of sheep numbers given in the *Agricultural Returns*. And when this shift from a lower to a higher quality output is reinforced by a widening of the price differential in favour of the better qualities, an upward bias in farmers' returns results which is not reflected in a simple quantity times average price computation.

Thirdly, although the emphasis in this brief appraisal of the Great Depression is on the overall change between 1867-71 and 1894-8, a further contrast between livestock and crops emerges when the timing of price changes is considered. Corn prices plunged after 1874 from their 'Golden Age' plateau and never recovered, declining further in the mid-eighties and again in the mid-nineties. Livestock prices on the other hand rose rapidly in the sixties and early seventies and, apart from the one year 1879, hardly fell significantly from these new heights until the mid-eighties. Even then they did not fall below their 1867-71 level and the further fall in the mid-nineties was slight compared with that of cereal prices. In 1896 a corn grower could look back on over twenty years of almost continually falling prices; a livestock farmer would be gradually reacclimatizing to a price level regrettably somewhat lower than in the prosperous seventies and early eighties but not very different from that of twenty five or thirty years earlier, and in compensation he could always point to his lower feed costs.

Finally, there is the nature of the information provided by aggregate models of the gross output kind. An abstraction like the 'national farm' can neither suffer depression nor enjoy prosperity: suffering and joy are attributes of human beings, in this context of the thousands of farmers who form part of the agricultural community. What is ideally needed are the numbers of English farmers to whom wheat was the lynch pin of their systems and the numbers who were in livestock, in sheep, milk, or beef. At the one extreme were those livestock farmers who had abandoned the plough before or during the Great Depression, together with many others whose arable acreage was negligible. At the other extreme there were no farmers specializing solely in wheat, although a significant number, concentrated in certain localities such as the Fens, southwest Lancashire, and the neighbourhood of large towns, kept few if any livestock and were wholly dependent on the sale of arable crops such as corn, hay, straw, and potatoes. Between these extremes was to be found every conceivable type of farming, classifiable into two main groups, those farmers who relied primarily on the sale of corn and to whom livestock were principally a source of fertility,¹ and those mainly dependent on livestock and whose ploughing was ancillary to their needs. During the Great Depression the numbers in this second group increased as mixed farmers abandoned the plough or fed their corn to stock rather than sell it on the market.

¹ As late as 1867, J. J. Mechi, the well-known Essex farmer, was 'of the opinion that, although livestock do not pay directly, they are essential to the well-being of the farm as providers of the best and cheapest manure'; more categorically, 'will any livestock (pigs, sheep, or cattle) pay market price for their food? - No' (*Chester Courant*, 16 October 1867).

IV

Accurately to divide the total number of farmers in the country into these categories is impossible, but, as a first approximation, use can be made of the division of England into agricultural regions introduced into the *Agricultural Returns* in 1868. Basically this is a single division into the 'grazing' counties of the north and west and the 'corn' counties of the south and east, following a line not unlike that drawn by Caird¹ and an argument used by Cobbett² even earlier. There were of course arable farms in the grazing counties, but they were undoubtedly out-numbered by livestock farmers in the south and east, from the Lincolnshire and Leicestershire graziers, the dairymen of the midland vales and the environs of towns, to the sheep masters of Romney Marsh, with the result that a simple comparison of 'grazing' with 'corn' counties exaggerates the relative number of arable farmers. Nevertheless the comparison is worth making. The greater area, 18 million acres as against 14.5,³ lay to the north and west and contained many more agricultural holdings over five acres in size, 172 thousand compared with 118 thousand in the south and east. The average size of these holdings was smaller in the 'grazing' counties, 70 acres as against 100 in the 'corn' counties,⁴ as was the ratio of farm workers to farmers at approximately 220 : 100 compared with 600 : 100 in the south and east.⁵ Justification for the descriptions 'grazing' and 'corn' applied to these two areas is provided by the statistics of crops and livestock. For example, the ten leading wheat growing counties were all situated in the east of the country and, although covering less than a quarter of the area of crops and grass in England, provided almost a half of the wheat acreage: at the other extreme, the ten counties with the highest numbers of milk cows contained between them practically a half of the country's total population of milk cows; these counties all lay in the north and west. The 'grazing' counties between them supported 68 per cent of England's milk cows,⁶ that branch of farming which, together with hill sheep and their crosses, another activity predominant in the north and west, proved most continuously profitable during the Great Depression.

Without wishing to press the geographical division too closely, it is this distinction between the livestock farmer and the arable farmer that is crucial to an understanding of the Great Depression. It was not simply that arable farmers, mainly in the south and east, suffered a steep fall in the prices of their principal output products whilst livestock farmers, predominant in the north and west, enjoyed more favourable prices, but that every fall in the price of cereals, so damaging to corn growers, was to them, the livestock producers, clear gain, because it meant a reduction in the price of their most important input—feed. Further, every fall in the price of bread to the consumer, other things equal, stimulated the demand for livestock products. Livestock farmers gained on either hand and their economic interests were

¹ J. Caird, *op. cit.* map, p. 1.

² W. Cobbett, *Rural Rides* (1930), ed. G.D.H. and Margaret Cole, III, 696–9.

³ These figures represent total acreage; the acreage of crops and grass (excluding rough grazing) was 12.0 million in the north and west, 11.8 million in the south and east.

⁴ *Agricultural Returns*, 1885; all these figures are insignificantly different from those of the next size of holding investigation in 1895.

⁵ Census of 1891.

⁶ These comparisons refer to the year 1896; there is little difference between the nineties and the seventies, e.g. the figure quoted was 69 in 1872. For a geographer's views on this division see W. Smith, *An Economic Geography of Great Britain* (1949), p. 53 et seq.

aligned with those of the manufacturing population to the extent that cheap bread meant cheap livestock feed and an expanding industry meant full employment, high wages, and a stronger demand for meat, milk, eggs, and dairy products.¹ Attempts to assess the impact of the Great, or any other, depression upon agriculture considered as a single form of economic activity are not very meaningful. Agriculture in these islands is not one industry but several; in particular it consists in the two sectors, arable and livestock, whose aims are basically incompatible. Arable farmers want a high price for their output of cereals, hay, and straw: livestock producers want low cereal and fodder prices because corn is to them an input not an output.

This division was not of course a phenomenon suddenly emerging in the eighteen seventies; throughout our history, for geographical reasons, the east and south have yielded most of our corn, whereas the north and west have been in the main producers of livestock.² But in the second half of the nineteenth century two developments, on the one hand improvements in transport, the opening up of foreign supplies, and the extension of international trade, and on the other, rising living standards and changing patterns of food consumption among the working classes, helped to produce a situation in England in which livestock products were in rapidly growing demand, especially so relative to the arable bread and potatoes, and cheap cereals were in abundant supply.

This was the hard truth that faced English corn growers as the prophecies of thirty years earlier were demonstrably fulfilled in the seventies and eighties. There was no lack of warning in the agricultural press; contributors to the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society* in the sixties pointed to the growing importance of livestock farming³ and in 1872 a leader writer in the *Agricultural Economist* went so far as to ask why grow corn at all? Why not pursue a rotation of two year's pasture, one year's meadow, and one year's green crop in order to keep more stock? But such a radical suggestion was premature and received the traditional reply, 'wheat and barley are the breakfast and dinner and something more to the farmer'.⁴ The same belief was expressed, and with more justice, in the eighteen thirties;⁵ it continued to be voiced by such as 'Squire' Chaplin, owner of some twenty three thousand Lincolnshire acres and for fifty years agriculture's spokesman in the House of Commons.⁶

The persistence among influential agriculturalists of this belief in the crucial importance of corn growing and the desirability, if inexpediency, of protection was paralleled by the persistence in the public mind of that tripartite image of an immutable English agriculture based on 'Squire', 'Giles', and 'Hodge' so beloved of successive generations of cartoonists. But was this general, 'official' picture adequately representative of the views and practices of the scores of

¹ This was explicitly recognized by some livestock farmers; for examples of anti-corn law, Free Trade farmers see W. Cooke Taylor, *Tour of the Manufacturing Districts* (1842), p. 87 and *Preston Guardian*, 27 September 1884, 10 December 1892, 13 April 1895.

² The implications of this division in the field of agrarian history are far reaching and little explored. Cf. the highland and lowland zones in R. G. Collingwood and J. N. L. Myers, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (2nd. ed. 1937), pp. 1-15.

³ For example, *J.R.A.S.* 2nd. series, II (1866), p. 45.

⁴ *Agricultural Economist*, 1 August 1872 and 1 September 1872.

⁵ See *Report from the S.C. of the House of Lords on the State of Agriculture* (H.C. 464 of 1837), QQ. 528-9, 3267-3271.

⁶ See, for example, *The Economist's* report (5 December 1879) of 'Mr. Chaplin on Protection', and *R.C. 1879-82, Final Report*, C. 3309 of 1882, supplementary memorandum by H. Chaplin, pp. 37-8.

thousands of farmers throughout the country, few of whom subscribed to the agricultural journals,¹ and even fewer read *The Times*, *Punch*, or *The Economist*, and whose farming, to judge by the *Agricultural Returns* and the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society*,² was not in fact so indissolubly attached to wheat growing as one is led to believe? Whom in reality did 'Squire' Chaplin represent?

V

The weather of 1879 was so bad that in July Chaplin moved for a Royal Commission.³ He was opposed by S. C. Read, member for South Norfolk and the only 'legitimate tenant farmer' ⁴ in the House. Read expressed the opinion that less corn and more grass should be grown, and cited Suffolk, which he said was all dairies before the Napoleonic War and should now be sown down again. It may be noted that Read lost his seat in the election of the following year. Chaplin's view prevailed and a commission was appointed. Its title was the Royal Commission on the Depressed State of the Agricultural Interest. Who or what was the 'Agricultural Interest'?

The members of the Commission were classified by the *Agricultural Economist* as four 'aristocrats',⁵ including the chairman the duke of Richmond, and two 'landed gentry',⁶ all of whom were extensive landowners south of the Trent, six 'others' ⁷ who 'may be considered farmers' representatives', together with two future Chancellors, G. J. Goschen and C. T. Ritchie, Bonamy Price and Sir William Stephenson, 'both great in political economy',⁸ Joseph Cowen, M.P. for Newcastle,⁹ and three spokesmen for Ireland.¹⁰ Excluding the Irishmen, twelve of the seventeen members were directly concerned in or considered to be sympathetic to the fortunes of agriculture.

Assistant Commissioners went out to their selected districts. Druce, Assistant Commissioner for the Home Counties, was also secretary to the Farmer's Club, and, in December, attended an important meeting of the Central Chamber of Agriculture in London where it was decided that local associated chambers should be circularized and local committees formed to furnish Assistant

¹ The *Agricultural Economist* (1 February 1882) was of the opinion that 'farmers do not read'; it declared itself the only paying agricultural journal on the occasion of Morton's appeal, as editor, for more readers, in the *Agricultural Gazette* (26 December 1881).

² The Farm Prize Reports in the *J.R.A.S.* between 1870 and 1891 illustrate the diversity of English farming.

³ This was not universal; for instance, a Cornish farmer later asserted that 1879 was his best year (*R.C.* 1894-7, Q. 37432).

⁴ *Agricultural Economist*, 1 August 1879.

⁵ The duke of Richmond (1818-1903), the 'farmers' friend', Lord President of the Council and first chairman of its agricultural committee, 1884; the duke of Buccleuch; earl Spencer and lord Vernon, the former also a member of the Privy Council's agricultural committee. For this classification see *Agricultural Economist*, 1 September 1879.

⁶ Chaplin and Col. R.N.F. Kingscote, chairman of the finance committee of the R.A.S. and governor of the Royal Agricultural College, for whose family background see *Gloucestershire Studies*, ed. H.P.R. Finberg (Leicester, 1957), pp. 159-173.

⁷ C. Howard, Wm. Stratten, J. Wilson (later Agricultural Adviser to the Board of Agriculture and Director of the Land Division), H. Rodwell, J. Clay, R. Patterson.

⁸ Price was Drummond Professor at Oxford; Stephenson began his career with a clerkship in the Treasury in 1827 and was for fifteen years chairman of the Inland Revenue Board.

⁹ Described in *Who Was Who* (1897-1916) as an 'old radical, imperialist, and anti-socialist', and assumed by the *Agricultural Economist* to be the 'representative of the working man' on the Commission.

¹⁰ M. Henry, J. L. Naper, J. Rice.

Commissioners with the 'facts' and to 'select men who could supply the information required, viz., evidence of fall in profit or fall in output or rise in cost of production'.¹ Besides Druce, two other Assistant Commissioners were present at this London meeting and, after some debate, the Chamber's business committee was instructed to 'observe' all this activity because some members of the committee served on the Commission and were thus unable to 'act'.

Among the witnesses called before the Richmond Commission, together with landowners, land agents for both individuals and corporate bodies, civil servants and others, were 35 farmers, almost all tenants. Of these 35 only one farmed less than 100 acres, 31 farmed more than 300 acres, 25 of them farming more than 500 and ten more than 1000, at a time when the average size of farm in England was perhaps less than 100 acres.² It is also illuminating to notice where these witnesses farmed. Twenty-six came from the 'corn' counties of the east and south and nine from the 'grazing' counties of the north and west; only four of the 35 hailed from north of the Trent, and of these four, two farmed in the arable East Riding. The ten leading wheat growing counties produced between them 14 witnesses; the ten leading dairy counties contributed only five.

Decided views and attitudes regarding, for instance, size of farm—270 acres was described as 'small'—and the nature of agriculture—almost synonymous with corn growing—were unconsciously revealed.³ Moreover, as appears in their questioning of witnesses, members of the Commission assumed *a priori* that depression was general, and much of their interrogation consisted in the kind of amicable discussion, with hearsay evidence prominent, of the weather, markets, taxes, yields, diseases, and so on that is indulged in at all times among farmers, agents, merchants and others of the agricultural community when all participants share a common interest and expertise.⁴

Thus with the Commission itself firmly led by the landowning aristocracy and gentry, all with large properties in the south and midlands, with farmers' views screened and organized by the Central and Associated Chambers of Agriculture whose headquarters, like those of the Farmers' Club and the Royal Agricultural Society, were in London, with farmer witnesses overwhelmingly reflecting the interests of corn growers, and with almost all concerned sharing a similar set of assumptions as to the nature of English agriculture, a fairly clear idea emerges of what was meant by the 'agricultural interest' and of where its centre of gravity lay.

The evidence before the Commission shewed that the immediate cause of depression was the weather, and that the only price fall, other than the short lived general fall of 1879, was that of wheat which no longer rose in price as compensation for a diminished output. Nevertheless the view prevailed that depression was universal, 'no description of estate or tenure has been exempted',⁵ and critics of this view received short shrift.⁶

¹ *Agricultural Economist*, 1 December 1879. In its *Final Report* the Commission put on record its view that the 'evidence [was] collected, we believe, with the greatest care and impartiality' (*R.C. 1879-82*, C.3309 of 1882, p. 33).

² No precise figure is available, but the average size of 'holding over five acres' in England, according to the *Agricultural Returns*, was 84 acres in both 1885 and 1895.

³ *R.C. 1879-82*, QQ. 49768-9, 33138-9.

⁴ *Ibid.* QQ. 33109-10, 138.

⁵ *R.C. 1879-82*, *Preliminary Report*, C.2778 of 1881, p. 24.

⁶ As, for example, did Giffen on calculating that agriculture's gross output had fallen by no more than six per cent between 1870 and 1880 (*ibid.* Q. 64733 foll; *The Times*, 7 January 1882).

In its *Final Report* the Commission listed an impressive number of burdens on the farmer, including tithe and local rates, farm labour which was increasingly costly and, as always, less efficient—the ‘very widespread complaint among farmers that the present system of education operates prejudicially to the interests of agriculture’, meaning simply that children were kept at school when they might be ‘usefully employed upon the farm’,¹ rents that had been unduly raised, railway rates that discriminated in favour of imports and so on. The numerous recommendations ranged from a ‘shift in the incidence of Local Taxation from real property to the Consolidated Fund’² to the desirability of one public department for agriculture. The government in its turn did little beyond introduce a second Agricultural Holdings Act in 1883, approve Lord Cairn’s Settled Land Bill in the following year, and in 1889 create a Board of Agriculture.³ By how much all this raised farmers’ incomes is a nice question.

However the weather improved, prices held, the threat of imports seemed to slacken, and grumbling among themselves, the agricultural interest carried on, some in new ways, others in the old. Prices, and this time including livestock prices, fell in the mid-eighties but subsequently recovered somewhat and the later eighties witnessed some mild rejoicing.⁴ The next outcry had to await another bout of deplorable weather initiated by the drought of 1893. But the weather experienced in different parts of the country varied even more markedly than in the seventies; in 1893 London experienced 114 days without rain, Manchester and Stonehurst only 30,⁵ whilst in north Derbyshire the ‘oldest inhabitant could scarcely remember a more productive year’.⁶ Nevertheless the cry of distress was formidable and a second Royal Commission was granted; against the advice of *The Economist* which maintained that, in respect of what might be *done*, the Richmond Commission had already elicited all the facts, that no new developments had occurred, and that another Commission would merely waste time and money:⁷ but time on occasion can be a valuable commodity to government.

VI

The members of the new Commission appointed by Gladstone’s government were a mixed body compared with their predecessors. The ‘aristocracy’ had shrunk to lords Cobham and Rendel, the one a liberal Lyttleton, the other an ex-engineer, although the ‘landed gentry’ were still powerfully represented in the persons of Chaplin, Kingscote, and W. H. Long.⁸ The Commons also provided the chairman, Shaw-Lefevre,⁹ first commissioner of works with a seat in the Cabinet, R. L. Everett, an East Anglian farmer, and F. A. Chan-

¹ *R.C. 1879–82, Final Report*, p. 27.

² *Ibid.* p. 25.

³ Of which Chaplin was first president with a seat in the Cabinet.

⁴ See the annual reviews of the preceding year in the *Agricultural Economist* of 1 January for 1889, 1890, and 1891.

⁵ Weather statistics from *J.R.A.S. LXIV* (1893), 849–856.

⁶ *R.C. 1894–7*, Q. 5133.

⁷ *The Economist*, 15 July 1893.

⁸ The Long estate of some 14,000 acres in Wiltshire was of ancient descent; for the family see *V.C.H. Wiltshire*, VII (1953), index, 233–4.

⁹ G. J. Shaw-Lefevre (1831–1928); lord Eversley, 1906; ex-member of the Privy Council’s agricultural committee, and a member of every Liberal government, except Gladstone’s of 1885, since 1866. In lord Rosebery’s administration of 1894–5 Shaw-Lefevre remained in the Cabinet as president of the Local Government Board.

ning,¹ ex-chairman of the Central and Associated Chambers of Agriculture, also, and untypically, Liberals. The Civil Service contributed R. Giffen, late of *The Economist* and now at the Board of Trade, C. N. Dalton, an expert on local government taxation, and C. Whitehead, technical adviser to the Board of Agriculture. The Committee was completed by W. C. Little, another East Anglian farmer and late Assistant Commissioner to the Richmond Commission, G. Lambert, C. I. Elton, a lawyer, O. Thomas from Wales, and J. Gilmour and J. Clay from Scotland.

As compared with the Richmond Commission, agriculture's representatives had both declined in number and changed in character. Whereas in the seventies leadership of the agricultural interest was firmly in the hands of the landed aristocracy, prominent in the House of Lords and the Privy Council, in the nineties the farming interest was struggling to wean itself from the now politically embarrassing aristocracy and to make its voice heard in the more hostile Commons. The establishment of a Board of Agriculture in 1889 opened a new avenue of advance for the agricultural interest via Whitehall and 'delegated legislation'.

Change is also noticeable among the farmer witnesses; not perhaps in terms of size of farm, as only five of the 39 whose acreage is known farmed less than 300 acres and 27 farmed more than 500 acres, but certainly in their regional dispersion. The majority, 22, still came from the east and south, but the north and west were now represented by no fewer than 18, and although the corn counties provided 13 witnesses, the dairy counties followed them close with 12.

Happily for the agricultural interest the Conservatives were returned in June 1895 and the balance of power within the Commission shifted decisively. Chaplin and Long joined the government as presidents of the Local Government Board and the Board of Agriculture respectively, Everett and Channing moved into opposition, and the chairman, Shaw-Lefevre, lost both office and seat.

Conflict of interest among the members of the Commission was apparent on the publication, after nearly two years work, of the second report in February 1896. Although the chief cause of depression was 'unanimously attributed' to the fall in prices,² the majority Report, with Cobham,³ Chaplin, Long, and Kingscote as leading signatories, was expressly confined to a discussion of rates and land tax and the question of State loans to agriculture. It concluded with a nasty rider to the effect that 'it would be inexpedient for any member of the commission to submit for presentation to the Secretary of State a counter report or memorandum in connexion with the ad interim report agreed to by the members of the commission dealing with questions which have not been considered by the commission'.⁴ A minority of three, led by the chairman, now clearly powerless to curb Chaplin and Long, and backed by Rendel and Giffen, expressed their disgust at this majority resolution and ignored it. Their own position was clear. 'The depression has been and still is far more serious in the eastern and southern counties of England, over an area of rather more than one third of England and Wales, than in the other parts of Great

¹ Author of *The Truth About Agricultural Depression* (1897).

² *R.C. 1894-7, Second Report*, C.7981 of 1896, p. 7. The first report of one page appeared in May 1894 as C.7400 of 1894; cf. *The Economist*, 7 March 1896, pp. 290-2 - 'Divided Counsels on Agricultural Relief'.

³ It would seem that Cobham's support was less than wholehearted in view of what Sir H. Fowler in the Commons described as his 'singular reservation' disagreeing with any reduction in the rate of assessment of land (*Parliamentary Debates*, 4th ser. XXXIX, 20 April 1896).

⁴ *R.C. 1894-7, Second Report*, p. 21.

Britain'.¹ The causes of this were (1) the east and south suffered unfavourable seasons beginning in 1892 and including two years, 1893 and 1895, of exceptional drought, the former being 'quite unprecedented', whilst the north and west had 'enjoyed far more favourable conditions'; (2) the east and south suffered greater in proportion because they were the chief wheat growing districts; (3) there was a comparative absence of small farms in the south and east and small farmers had done better owing to a preponderance of family labour, more attention to smaller products, and more dairying than corn growing; (4) 'burdens on land' in the south and east in the shape of tithe, land tax, and local rates were as a rule much heavier.²

The minority then proceeded to discuss prices, wages, and remedial measures, which latter, as might be expected, were limited to landlord-tenant agreements, rent levels, railway rates, 'co-operation with a view to getting rid of middlemen' and the mitigation of some of the grosser inequalities of the so-called 'burdens on land'. This was as much as could be done 'short of tampering with the currency, debasing the gold standard, or adopting protective duties'.³ The intrepid trio then demolished the 'burdens on land' case by shewing that in fact the 'burdens' had diminished, and the chairman, in a supplementary solo, stated, 'there appears to be a general impression among farmers and others connected with the agricultural interest that the actual average payments in respect of local rates on land have considerably increased during the last 25 years. This however is not in accord with the facts supplied from official sources, or with the experience of the great majority of individual cases so far as they have been laid before the Commission'.⁴ Two months later, in April 1896, Shaw-Lefevre resigned.

The gravamen of Shaw-Lefevre's charge against the majority of the Commission was that Chaplin and Long privately prepared an Agricultural Rating Bill at the Local Government Board and then bulldozed the Royal Commission into endorsing its recommendations in the fortnight between the 26 January, when they first acquainted the Commission with their plan, and the 11 February when Chaplin, ignoring Shaw-Lefevre's plea for longer consideration, gave notice in the Commons of his intention to introduce the Bill. In Shaw-Lefevre's words, bearing in mind the 'constitution of the Royal Commission, how could they refuse a scheme for relieving land of three quarters of its rates put before it by the government?'⁵

The *Final* (majority) *Report* in 1897⁶ under the signature of Cobham as chairman, and which was almost rivalled in bulk by memoranda, reservations and two impressive minority reports, took the form of a tour of the country and vindicated Shaw-Lefevre's views. Beginning with Essex, the worst hit county, eight pages described the 'corn' counties; two sufficed for the 'grazing' counties. Recommendations were insubstantial and the only concrete financial

¹ R.C. 1894-7, *Second Report*, p. 22.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.* p. 23.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 32.

⁵ *The Times*, 27 April 1896; for the controversy between Shaw-Lefevre and Chaplin see *The Times*, 29 and 30 April and 1 May, and *Parliamentary Debates*, 4th ser. XXXIX, 27 April, when Chaplin referred to Shaw-Lefevre's letter in *The Times* and was strongly attacked by the opposition.

⁶ R.C. 1894-7, *Final Report*, C.8540 of 1897.

measure was the Agricultural Rates Act of 1896,¹ the result of the Commission's two year deliberation of the 'burdens on land'.

The *Final Report* is a discordant compendium of many voices. Pertinent questioning by Liberals and free traders, who were not prepared to accept uncritically the agricultural interest's cry of a ruined agriculture, disclosed new problems and discredited some of the evidence. For example, Giffen's survey of world agricultural output unexpectedly revealed that the supply of wheat was not running ahead of population and therefore the fall in price must have been due to restricted demand.² Farm accounts submitted to the Commission as evidence of depression were criticized as unrepresentative, '50 of the 69 [which 'gave sufficient detail to enable them to be checked'] relate to the eight chief corn growing, and therefore most depressed, counties, and the whole 69 are collected from only 16 of the 52 counties of England and Wales'. In the same context, the sceptical view is expressed that 'opinions of tenant farmers . . . cannot, any more than those of landlords and agents, be accepted as the views of disinterested witnesses'.³

For all the gathering and sifting of evidence no common understanding of the decisive changes that were occurring in the agriculture of the western world is to be observed among the members of the Commission. In particular, although the *Final Report* was cast in the form of a comparison of the north and west with the east and south, the Commission seemed curiously blind to the full implications of this contrast. The differential fall in farm prices, the growth of dairying and so on were pointed to and no more; out of nearly two hundred pages exactly two were devoted to production costs and these included three paragraphs only on feeding stuffs and manures.⁴ That the fall in price of feed relative to changes in the price of livestock products during the great depression was of more importance to livestock farmers than this space apportionment would indicate is suggested by what may be termed the livestock: feed price ratio, which expresses the relationship between the average of dairy and livestock prices and the cost of feed in the two periods 1867-71 and 1894-8. It moved in the producer's favour from 100 to about 150.⁵

VII

Very clearly the basic conflict of interest, felt rather than formulated, between the two main groups of English farmers, and masked by the ambivalent rural-urban, protection-free trade division, prevented the formulation of any co-ordinated view, any single, forceful, agricultural policy, any effective co-operation.⁶ And in the absence of unanimity, with on the one hand a declining

¹ 59 & 60 Vict. Cap. 16; by which the Exchequer was to contribute annually a sum equal to half the amount raised from agricultural land in 1895.

² *Final Report*, App. V. p. 73; 'people consume less cereals per head because with increase of resources, they consume more meat, which *pro tanto* displaces the cereals'.

³ *Ibid.* pp. 118-19. The Commission was also interested to know why 'in 16 instances (seven of which refer to Essex), profits were earned between 1889 and 1894 from five to 24 per cent on the capital employed, the rents ranging from 9s. 7d. to 34s. 5d. per acre'.

⁴ *R.C. 1894-7, Final Report*, pp. 87-9, paras. 313-15.

⁵ Average livestock and dairy prices are assumed to have fallen by 10 per cent; the cost of imported maize and oilcakes fell by 40 per cent.

⁶ The great London agricultural conference of December 1892, convened by the Central Chamber of Agriculture and addressed by Chaplin and Lowther, split on the question of protection which Prof. J. P. Sheldon described as the '*ignis fatuus* leading our southern and eastern farmers away from their true interests' (*The Future of British Agriculture* (1893), p. 142). A similar conflict obtained among the members of the Royal Commission on Agriculture of 1919-20 over the problem of whether to continue government support of corn prices (see *Interim Report*, Cmd. 473 of 1919).

corn growing interest nostalgically looking to the past and on the other hand thousands of livestock farmers—with the small hard-working family farmer in the majority, motivated by profit and with a keen eye to the main chance—quietly increasing their output with the aid of cheap, imported cereals, the vacuum left by these divergent interests was easily filled by the confused idealism of Free Land Leaguers, Georgists and anti-landlord radicals, bi-metallists, and all the advocates of peasant ownership, small holdings, and the return to the land.

Finally, it may be asked why, if arable farming did not pay and livestock farming did, East Anglian corn growers persisted in unprofitable practices? The short answer is that time was needed to distinguish an apparent cycle from an unmistakably secular trend, and it may be argued that a certain rigidity, not merely of system but of mind, was the penalty paid by the third generation for the undoubted success of their forebears' 'Norfolk system'. The earl of Leicester, son of the great Coke, grassed down his home farm and ran sheep at a profit, but, as he explained in a letter to Shaw-Lefevre, he almost despaired of his tenants having the sense to follow his example.¹ As a Lancashire farmer observed after touring Essex in 1896, 'new-comers are going in for milk, cheese, butter, fruit, and sheep but with the average Essex farmer it is corn, corn, corn'.² The difference in attitude is apparent in the evidence of farmers and landowners before the two Royal Commissions. Some, and not only in the north, farmed for the market and produced only that which paid them to do so; others continued in the ways of their fathers.³

The outcry died down as the century drew to its close and the agricultural interest learned to accept, if not embrace, the new England. Apart from the social problems associated with the spread of urban values and the political decline of the landed interest, what, in the narrower economic field, did the Great Depression achieve? It dethroned 'orient and immortal wheat' and turned English farmers in a new direction, that is to the production of quality livestock products. It inflicted suffering on a particular section of farmers, the large corn growers. Output figures shew that agriculture was not ruined; on the contrary an important internal revolution was effected during a period of falling prices. Seemingly unheeding of the cries of distress that sounded for over twenty years, the majority of farmers pursued the path of self interest as they saw it; others, protesting loudly or lamenting quietly, were impelled by the logic of their bank balances to change their systems; some few, to whom cowkeeping, the laying down to grass, or the selling of hay and straw were distasteful violations of the canon, went to the wall.⁴ It needed war or the threat of war to revive their kind.⁵

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¹ *R.C. 1894-7*, C7400 of 1896 IV, 596-7.

² *Preston Guardian*, 24 October 1896.

³ See also the examples of successful farming during the depression described in the minority reports of Lambert and Channing (*R.C. 1894-7, Final Report*, pp. 204-379), and by Shaw-Lefevre (*ibid.* C.7400 of 1896, IV, 611-14); for instances of change in Essex, see R. Hunter Pringle's series of articles in the *Agricultural Gazette* of 1887, July onwards, especially 10 October 1887.

⁴ This latter frame of mind is well treated in the earlier novels of A. G. Street, as, for example, in *The Gentleman of the Party* (1936).

⁵ The traditional view of farmers as men who grow corn persisted into the twentieth century. For example, the first effective post-1921 legislation gave help to sugar beet (1925) and wheat (1932), such was the persuasive, political power of the 'voice of Norfolk' against which Viscount Astor and Dr K. A. H. Murray pleaded vigorously in the nineteen thirties (see *Land and Life* (1932) and *The Planning of Agriculture* (1933)).

APPENDIX

Two gross output estimates, one for the agriculture of the U.K. and one for that of England, have been computed. They are based on Dr Ojala's work, the main change being the substitution of more appropriate home prices for the Sauerbeck series of import prices used by Dr Ojala, in the case of Hay and Straw, Fruit, Vegetables, Beef, Mutton, Pigmeat, Milk, Poultry and Eggs. Beef and Mutton prices are based on the Smithfield series of home produced beef and mutton given in *Agricultural Statistics*. Milk and Poultry and Egg prices are derived from material in *Report on Wholesale and Retail Prices in the U.K.* (1903), the two Royal Commissions of 1879-82 and 1894-7, and Lancashire sources (see *supra*, p. 320 n. 1). The Hay and Straw, Fruit, Vegetables, and Pigmeat prices are estimated from data in *Agricultural Statistics*, Lancashire newspapers, and *Agricultural Statistics of Ireland* 1910 (Cd. 5882). Revised quantities for the output of Oats and Hay and Straw follow from the re-estimate of the numbers of non-farm horses (*supra*, p. 321 n. 6) and of Potatoes from a reconsideration of the Irish potato crop.

The final series are not claimed to be definitive; in particular the dairy, the poultry and the fruit and vegetable outputs could be improved by the discovery of further prices and by the estimation of more accurate quantities. It is considered, however, that these crude alterations to Dr Ojala's estimates contribute to a more realistic measure of the Great Depression. Details of individual series and of methods of estimation may be obtained from the author.

The Gross Output of the Agriculture of the U.K. and England (£ million)

	U.K.			England	
	1867-9	1870-6	1894-1903	1867-71	1894-8
Wheat	35.38	27.56	7.72	28.44	7.64
Barley	16.78	17.56	9.43	12.62	7.54
Oats	10.54	9.07	8.07	4.28	4.23
Potatoes	14.02	13.82	11.34	3.00	3.00
Hay & Straw, Fruit, Vegetables	20.11	19.40	21.75	14.00	17.00
Other crops	7.34	7.58	3.64	3.09	2.06
ARABLE	104.17	94.99	61.95	65.43	41.47
Beef	34.90	45.67	42.05	14.59	16.02
Mutton	25.92	30.51	25.20	14.60	12.59
Pigmeat	18.60	22.95	19.13	9.59	10.52
Horses	1.50	2.00	3.00	1.00	2.00
Milk	33.78	38.51	43.56	15.40	20.29
Wool	7.49	8.27	3.24	5.62	2.36
Poultry & Eggs	4.57	6.96	10.00	3.50	7.00
LIVESTOCK	126.76	154.87	146.18	64.30	70.78
TOTAL	230.93	249.86	208.13	129.73	112.25
Index	100	108	90	100	87