

The Rise of the Great Estate in the Late 18th and Early 19th Century

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The modernisation of agriculture took place in the context of fluctuating farm prices. They fell during the second quarter of the eighteenth century-- the so called agricultural depression-- and then increased erratically until the 1790s. Corn prices doubled and tripled during the harvest years of 1795, 1799 and 1800, and the price level remained high and volatile until the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Then began a slide of prices that lasted until the middle of the nineteenth century. The pace of improvement of farm methods may have been a determinant of the price history through its impact on agricultural supply, but tariff policy and increased market integration also played a role. The fluctuations in the price level certainly affected the evolution of farming and rural society in general. Rising prices after 1750 and especially during the Napoleonic Wars accelerated enclosure; the high prices of the 1790s threatened the standard of living of the rural poor, gave rise to radicalism, and brought on changes in poor relief like the Speenhamland system; landowners who had gained from the high prices of 1795–1815 sought to preserve their rent rolls in the succeeding deflation through the corn laws, which imposed substantial duties on imported grain.

THE RISE OF THE GREAT ESTATE

Eighty per cent of Britain's farm land lay in England and Wales, which produced 89 per cent of Britain's farm output in the mid-nineteenth century. While the agriculture of the Scottish Highlands was revolutionised by the clearances, the changes that affected the largest share of British agriculture occurred mainly in England and comprised the enclosure of the open fields, the growth in farm size and the consolidation of the great

estate. Hence, discussion will focus on the English story. Many of the changes in farm methods and management affected Scottish agriculture as well.

Over half of the farm land in medieval England was organised in open fields and commons. Under this system, the land of the village was divided rigidly between arable and pasture. Holdings of arable consisted of strips scattered around the village. The strips were grouped into several large fields, which were also often units in a crop rotation. Three fields were common, in which case one was planted with wheat or rye, the second with barley, oats, beans or peas, and the third was fallow. Each year the fields shifted to the next phase in the sequence. Every farmer had to follow this communally agreed plan. The grass of the village included the meadow on which hay was cut, and the common where the sheep and cattle were pastured in a village herd. In densely settled regions, the commons were small, but in many parts of the kingdom there were great tracts of waste used as common pasture for sheep. The herd was also turned onto the fallow field, as well as the other fields after they were harvested, in order to eat weeds and manure the land.

Enclosed farming was the antithesis of the open field system. When land was enclosed, the owners usually exchanged strips and divided commons, so that each proprietor had large, consolidated blocks of property. Communal rotations and grazing were abolished. Each owner

acquired exclusive control over his property, so every farmer could cultivate as he pleased without reference to the rest of the community. In 1500, about 45 per cent of the farm land in England was already enclosed, and most of that had probably never been open. The open fields in 1500 included much of the grain growing land in the country. In 1700, 29 per cent of England remained open or common, and the proportion shrank to 5 per cent in 1914, where it remains today. This phase of the enclosure movement was particularly intense in the Midlands, where over half of the farmland was enclosed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most of the remaining open land was common pasture.

In the eighteenth century, much of the enclosing was accomplished by parliamentary act. In such an enclosure the principal landowners of the village petitioned parliament for a bill to enclose their village. Unanimity of the owners was not required: in general the owners of 75 per cent to 80 per cent of the land had to be in favour in order for the bill to proceed. Since landownership was highly concentrated, an enclosure could – and often did – proceed with a majority of small proprietors opposed. In the memorable phrase of the Hammonds (1924), ‘the suffrages were not counted but weighed’. The bill named commissioners, who carried out the enclosure, and endorsed their award in advance. The commissioners held hearings in the village, identified the proprietors, appointed a surveyor who mapped the village and valued each holding, and finally reallocated

the land so that each proprietor (including those who opposed the enclosure) received a grant of land in proportion to the value of his or her holdings in the open fields. A total of 3,093 acts enclosed 4,487,079 acres of open field and common pasture in this manner. A further 2,172 acts were concerned exclusively with the enclosure of an additional 2,307,350 acres of common pasture and waste.

A second major change was an increase in farm size. In the middle ages demesnes were already several hundred acres, but the farms of serfs were usually 30 acres or less. During the population decline in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, farm size increased. Estate surveys show that the average farm-- including demesnes, copyholds and leased land-- in northern England and in open field villages in southern England was 65 acres in c. 1700. Enclosed farms in the south were already larger, however. In the eighteenth century, small farms were amalgamated into large ones in open field villages in the south, and throughout the north. By 1800, 150 acres was the average across all types of farms in the south, and 100 acres was the average in the north.

The growth in farm size was accompanied by a revolution in land tenure. Many small farms in 1700 either were owned outright by their occupiers or were held on very long term agreements like copyholds for lives or beneficial leases. During the eighteenth century, small freeholds were bought up by great estates and manorial lords stopped renewing copyholds for lives and beneficial leases. The formerly yeomen lands passed into the hands of the gentry and aristocracy. The small farms were amalgamated into large and were then leased to large-scale farmers. The result was the consolidation of the great estate and the emergence of the three-tiered social structure of rich landlord, substantial tenant farmer and poor landless labourer.

Eighteenth-century agricultural improvers regarded enclosure and the creation of large farms as prerequisites for the modernisation of agriculture, and this view has become widespread among historians. Since enclosing began on a large scale in the late fifteenth century, the defenders have argued that it led to the adoption of modern methods. Quesnay, the French physiocrat, advanced the view that higher farm output required more investment, and that only large-scale farmers had access

to the requisite capital. Arthur Young adopted this view and merged it with the claim that enclosure also led to modernisation. For Young (1774), the large 'farmer, with a greater proportional wealth than the small occupier, is able to work great improvements in his business . . . He also employs better cattle and uses better implements; he purchases more manures, and adopts more improvements.' Open fields inhibited this style of farming since they gave the small, backward farmers the power to check the initiative of the large-scale entrepreneur. Enclosure was essential to set free the process of investment and modernisation.

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In the eighteenth century, there was a consensus that enclosure and large-scale farming raised output. There was, however, a deep difference of opinion about the impact of these changes on employment. One group, whose origins ran back to the earliest critics of enclosure, argued that enclosures and large farms reduced employment in agriculture. By the seventeenth century, in an ironic twist, some advocates of this view were defending enclosures on the grounds that the expulsion of people from farming created a manufacturing workforce. This, of course, became Marx's view on the subject. The other group argued that enclosures and large farms increased agricultural employment since they led to more intensive cultivation. Young endorsed this position, and argued that, none the less, large farms and enclosures stimulated manufacturing since they increased food production, which led to a larger population, most of whom were employed off the farm. The claims that enclosure raised employment and that the industrial workforce was the result of population growth (rather than the release of labour from agriculture) have become standard views since their restatement by Chambers (1953).

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