

THE INFLUENCE OF FARM SIZE AND
RELATED SOCIAL FACTORS ON SURVIVAL
AND FAILURE IN ARABLE AND DAIRY
FARMING IN INTERWAR ENGLAND

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Abstract

Small farms disappeared at a disproportionately high rate in interwar England, when compared to large farms. Unnoticed until now, this was coincidental with the dominance of farming and its political agenda by a hegemonic bloc of large-scale farmers and landowners and their supporters; this lobby neglected to demonstrate that it was small farm failure that they were utilising to represent interwar failure across the entire industry. Such continued dominance after the Second World War resulted in the historiography seeing shrinkage of the arable acreages found commonly on large farms as demonstrative of depression in interwar agriculture. Statistics show that large farms were actually better able to withstand agricultural depression. Large-scale farmers in all areas of England decreased their arable acreages voluntarily, moving into dairy production; indeed, historians have, recently, seen dairy farming expansion as showing interwar agricultural success. However, the increased competition and falling milk prices brought failure to the small farms traditionally involved in dairying. Simultaneous creation of Government subsidised smallholdings maintained artificially high numbers of small farms, further increasing competition amongst them and masking their falling numbers. The large farm lobby has attributed interwar agricultural depression to Governments' lack of financial support; however, it used the social capital attached to ownership of substantial land and capital to influence agricultural policy to favour large-scale farming. The resulting price guarantees for milk and wheat benefited large farms even as disappearance of small farms quickened in pace. Large-scale farmers also profited from the employment of paid labour and from economies of scale, neither of which were available to small farmers. The agricultural hegemonic bloc also attributed agriculture's problems, volubly and continually, to workers and minimum wage regulation whilst small farmers' requirements went unheeded, leading to small farm disappearance. These problems of powerlessness amongst small businesses persist to this day.

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Abbreviations Used

Abbreviations Used in Text and Footnotes

AWB – Agricultural Wages Board

CCA – Central Chambers of Agriculture

CLA – Country Landowners' Association

JAES - Journal of the Agricultural Economics Society

JPAES – Journal of the Proceedings of the Agricultural Economics Society

MAF – Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries

MMB – Milk Marketing Board

NALRWU – National Agricultural Labourers' and Rural Workers' Union

NUAW – National Union of Agricultural Workers

NFMPR – National Federation of Milk Producer Retailers

NFU – National Farmers' Union

TUC – Trades Union Congress

Introduction

The study of the agriculture and of rural England between the two World Wars to date has suffered from a failure to recognise the importance of scale in farming, as represented by farm size, upon the prosperity, survival and failure of farmers. A tendency exists to rely on comparisons of major types of farming in order to determine the economic state of agriculture at the time and then to make judgements on the social conditions that reflect these determinations. Contrasting opinions on the overall state of interwar agriculture have resulted; earlier studies ascribed failure to the industry whilst later ones judged it a success, depending upon which of arable or dairy farming had been given greater prominence in the studies undertaken. Evidence that has not before been used to determine interwar conditions will be examined in an attempt to reveal the basis for the existence of these contrasts; trends in numbers of farms of contrasting scale, as revealed by the *Agricultural Statistics* collected by the Ministry of Agriculture for the interwar period, will be used as the indicator of success and failure.

Arable farming has been understood as in decline as a result of its shrinking acreage between 1919 and 1939 whilst dairy farming is noted for its expansion. Arable farming tended, although not exclusively, of course, to be undertaken on large farms in the south and east of England whilst dairy farming was traditionally seen as a small farm process carried out in the pastoral north and west. The expectation would be that small farms would have prospered and their numbers would have been, if not expanded, then

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maintained, especially in counties of dairying renown, whilst large farm numbers would decline, notably in the south and east.

Problems in arable farming stemming from long-term falls in international grain prices¹ have become an accepted part of the story of interwar agriculture and, so, an obvious conclusion would be that any evidence found of falling farm numbers demonstrated the operation of simple market mechanisms which made English arable farmers less competitive. This thesis will explore the possibility that the decline of arable farming caused a move by large-scale arable farmers into dairying in the 1920s which created problems of competition in the markets for milk which small farms were unable to withstand. The influence upon the fortunes of small-scale farmers of the introduction of the Milk Marketing Board in 1933 as a means by which Government could guarantee milk prices, ostensibly, to all dairy farmers, will also come under scrutiny; the expectation would be that fluctuations in farm numbers might be smoothed as the result of an enforced equilibrium of prices and production. The contrasting fortunes of the agricultural industry could then be seen simply as the result, initially, of correctly functioning international markets which were then distorted by a National Government that was artificially maintaining inefficient producers. The same could be said for the introduction of State subsidised smallholdings, especially during the 1920s, and of the Wheat Act, introduced in 1932 to guarantee prices for wheat farmers, and these measures will be examined.

¹ Malenbaum, W., *The World Wheat Economy, 1885-1939* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1953), p.177.

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Issues of social class will be explored towards the end of this thesis and the part they played in the development of English rural society between the two World Wars will be assessed. The history of interwar rural England has been considerably shaped by the rural class structure between the Wars. The dominant class of large-scale, employing farmers and landowners reacted to those developments in the international economy which were forcing structural change on an increasingly uncompetitive English agriculture by demanding Government support. The response, however, was the development of policies of support for agriculture that may have ignored or even militated against the needs of small-scale, petit bourgeois, farmers and enabled a consolidation of larger scale farmers and landowners to take place within the dominant class during the interwar years. Larger scale farmers and members of the aristocracy and gentry thus formed the heart of the rural bourgeoisie,² a class defined by its ownership of accumulated labour in the form of capital³ and, extensively, as land.

This is not a study of social class in the form of an anatomy of the cultural practices and consumption behaviour that are often perceived to be the signifiers of social class. This is a study of the economic behaviour that is intrinsic to the possession of capital of differing scales, insofar as economic fortunes derive from that capital, which allows for the reproduction of the particular behaviour that acts, in sociological studies, as the signifier of

² Fforde, M., *Conservatism and Collectivism, 1886-1914* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), p.167.

³ Bourdieu, P., 'The Forms of Capital', in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. by Richardson, J.G. (New York: Greenwood 1986), pp.241-58, (p.241).

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positions in the class structure.⁴ Newby et al. state that, 'Land is also capital'⁵ and are forthright in recognising its economic and social significance in the countryside with this significance being central to this study. Farms of over 50 acres in extent required the presence of paid labour between the Wars. The representative voices of agriculture, the NFU and CLA, were dominated by arable farmers and landowners who accumulated capital through the payment of labour on their farms. The possession of capital allows for the operation of influence in policy making through the operation of social capital. The extent to which they created a rhetoric of their betrayal by Government based upon the implementation by Governments of compulsory minimum wage rates in agriculture will be explored. The influence of the rhetoric combined with the operation of social capital of this rural grouping upon Government legislation that favoured employing farmers will be investigated.

A clear clash of interests exists between the ownership of agricultural businesses cultivating sufficient land to allow capital to be accumulated from labour power and from the working class that supplies it. The structural conflict between capital and labour has, where it has been examined at all, tended to occlude the possible existence of any adverse influence of the extensive ownership of economic and social capital by large-scale farmers and landowners upon the survival chances of small farm businesses. Small-scale farmers had no direct interest in the employment of labour and, logically, only

⁴ Bourdieu, P., *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 2008; 1st published 1979), pp.55-6.

⁵ 'Land is also capital, a highly secure, long-term investment and a sound collateral.' Newby, H., Bell, C., Rose, D. and Saunders, P., *Property, Paternalism and Power: Class and Control in Rural England* (London: Hutchinson and Co. Ltd, 1978), p.39.

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an antagonistic relationship with large farmers with whom they were in competition in the marketplace, whether this was for the sale of commodities or a share of State agricultural support. Very little evidence appears to exist of any wide recognition of the structural conflict between large and small farmers. The existence of an antagonism between small-scale farmers and labour is taken for granted in the behaviour of the dominant class in the interwar years; it is further implied by an almost complete absence of an alternative rhetoric promoting small farm requirements, although the militancy of some small-scale milk farmers is recognised, below. The effects of this apparent acquiescence by small farmers to their leadership by a social class inimical to their interests will be demonstrated, although the causes will remain to be explored.

The study of agriculture in interwar England is fraught with difficulty because the conclusions made in the writing to date are often partial, contradictory or, even, self-contradicting. Chapter One of this thesis will explore the contradictory basis of the debate by introducing evidence that stressed the existence of depression in farming but also evidence of rising farm incomes. The necessity for additional evidence and a novel approach will be demonstrated.

The introduction of data on trends in farmer and farm numbers in Chapter Two may overcome some of the difficulty in determining between agricultural success and failure by demonstrating any human cost of the economic conditions in agriculture between the Wars. Given the oft-heard

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expressions by agriculture's proponents and supporters of the emotional attachment of farmers to farming and its land, any significant disappearance of farms and farmers from the industry between 1919 and 1939 might be considered one of the reasons, beyond simplistic economic definitions, that agriculture was perceived to have been in a depressed state in the period. However, greater output occurred for the industry as a whole. Arable acreages fell whilst dairy output increased. The conclusion appears simple; fortunes in interwar agriculture were mixed and an examination of reliable, frequently collected data on farm numbers should show arable farmers to be failing and disappearing whilst dairy farmers survived and numbers were, at least, maintained, if not increased.

Closer examination of the statistical data is undertaken in Chapters Three and Four. A search will be made for incidence of failure and disappearance of farms in dairy farming, the branch of agriculture which has appeared in the historiography to date to be the most successful. Small farms, often found in dairy farming, will be analysed in counties most commonly associated with dairy farming: the West Riding of Yorkshire and Lancashire. It will be seen that arable acreages in the dairy areas, usually found on the larger farms, were declining simultaneously with the increase in dairying, suggesting a switch into milk production on large farms. The statistical evidence provided is complemented by an examination of the situation that had developed in the milk industry by the early 1930s. The conclusion emerges that large farms had been entering into milk production since the First World War and had, almost literally, flooded the market.

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Farm disappearance is examined in even greater detail in Chapter Five. Small farm failure is found in further counties in the pastoral region as well as in the arable region where dairy farming was increasing. The effect of difficulties for existing small farms may have been somewhat obscured in the 1920s by the creation of heavily State-subsidised smallholdings in some of these counties. Small farms disappearing in the areas of pastoral farming where average farm sizes were similar to the national average, such as Devon and Gloucester, but also in counties in the region associated traditionally with large-scale arable farming, such as Hampshire, Norfolk and West Suffolk, would amount to country-wide failure. Simultaneous disappearance of arable acreages and dairy cattle increases in arable and pastoral counties will indicate the likelihood of a similar switch to dairy farming by large-scale farms. Small farm numbers in Lincoln-Holland, where farms were uncharacteristically small on average and where smallholdings formed such a large proportion of small farms that they were insulated by subsidy, may not show the same patterns of disappearance as found in other arable counties.

Chapter Six will show that small farms were not commonly reliant on arable production and so the support of Government in the form of the Milk Marketing Board (MMB) would be assumed to have been of great importance to them. A comparison is made of the relative rates of disappearance of both large and small farms in the 1920s and the 1930s to assess the impact of Government legislation that offered financial support to farmers. Particular attention will be paid to the effects of the MMB and the Wheat Act of 1932 on farms of contrasting size. The results of the influence of large-scale farmers

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and landowners, as part of a rural 'hegemonic bloc', in achieving the enactment of these Government policies, structured to work in their interests and against those of small farmers, will be scrutinised.

The work presented here has a strong empirical element in its study of interwar rural England insofar as attempting to make judgements only on the basis of documented experience. Statistics that show change over time represent documented experience since they are a record of a number of occurrences of a defined nature that related to social agents which can reasonably be accepted as having actually taken place and, thus, to have been experienced. Agricultural statistics are used to provide a substantial empirical base because they are a record of a large number of common experiences provided in sets which were collected on an annual basis. The importance of the analysis is to make sense of how these sets of documented experiences are related so that a trend in one can be identified and, then, be seen in its relation to a trend in another. Related trends such as these become all the more likely to be representative of the actual events of the past when supported by the commentary and documentary evidence provided, here.

The aim of this work is to establish whether or not a trend exists that shows that the larger the resources of land and capital attaching to a farmer and a farm in England between the Wars, the greater was their chance of survival and, potentially, success, irrespective of the type of farming they may have been engaged upon. Were the opposite to be found to be true and small farms be seen to have enjoyed success at the expense of their larger

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counterparts, an appropriate investigation of the causes would be necessary, especially in the light of long-term trends that show decreases in small farm numbers until, at least, the 1980s.⁶ The conditions for the success of small farms in adverse international economic circumstances would surely have resonance today, at a time when small business and entrepreneurship are being regarded as providing the impetus for economic growth and individual achievement.⁷ The search for the social and economic basis for any trend that may be illuminated through this examination of statistical and documentary evidence from interwar England begins here. Any conclusions reached may well be strongly supported by the evidence presented but they are, of course, open to question because the search for further information that might shed light or cast doubt upon any conclusions about the past remains the social responsibility of the historian.

⁶ Grigg, D., 'Farm Size in England and Wales from Early Victorian Times to the Present', *Agricultural History Review*, 35 1, (1987), 179-89, (p.185).

⁷ Frankish, J., Roberts, R., and Storey, D., 'Enterprise: a Route out of Disadvantage and Deprivation?', in *Enterprise, Deprivation and Social Exclusion: the Role of Small Business in Addressing Social and Economic Inequalities*, ed. by Southern, A. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp.16-38, (pp.16-17).

Chapter 1: The Discourse of Agricultural Distress in Interwar England

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The representation of decline in the fortunes of English agriculture which has been predominant in the historiography of the period between the First and the Second World Wars originated in the interwar period itself, as will be shown in this chapter. This representation is reflected, for instance, in the pronouncements of agricultural bodies made at the time that stressed the ongoing problems of agriculture. The spokesman of the Central Landowners' Association (CLA), Lord Hastings, for instance, when questioned as to when he regarded tithe rentcharge to have become an unsustainable burden upon agricultural land and, thus, upon farmers, replied that it was coincident with the beginning of an agricultural depression that had begun in 1923 or 1924 and was ongoing in December 1934, while the Central Chambers of Agriculture (CCA) wrote in 1934 of 'the long neglect and the consequent depreciation of the condition of both buildings and land'.¹ Some credence must be given to both the contemporary and the historiographical representation of agriculture as in decline in England between the Wars, if only because of the weight of opinion that will be shown to have been behind it, but evidence has been presented recently that suggests that the nature and extent of it were subject

¹ Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge, *Report of the Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge in England and Wales, etc. (Statement by His Majesty's Government - Minutes of Evidence Taken before the Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge), 1935-1936*, (Cmd.5102), (London: Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge, 1936), p.181.

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to some considerable exaggeration,² as will be made clear. However, it is pertinent to an exploration of the fortunes of small-scale farms and their operators that it appears to have been accepted that the arable areas of the east of England suffered particularly badly,³ these being areas characterised by farms of above average size,⁴ indicating, perhaps, that large-scale farmers experienced relatively greater problems than those on smaller holdings, a possibility that will be investigated in later chapters. This chapter will demonstrate that the construction of the picture of depression was general and made little distinction between the fortunes of farmers of varying scales and, in particular, put little overall emphasis on the conditions of small-scale operators. This is not to say that no appreciation of the existence of small farmers and smallholders existed, as future chapters will show, merely that any adverse conditions that they experienced were represented as being an aspect of a malaise affecting all of English agriculture.

The statement from the CCA on the state of rural buildings and land demonstrates that concern over rural decay extended beyond the economics of agriculture and its personnel to encompass the landscape itself and, by extension, the fabric of rural society in its interweaving with a countryside

² Brassley, P., 'British Farming between the Wars', in *The English Countryside between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline*, ed. by Brassley, P., Burchardt, J., and Thompson, L. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006a), pp.187-99.

³ Howkins, A., 'Death and Rebirth? English Rural Society, 1920-1940', in *The English Countryside between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?*, ed. by Brassley, P., Burchardt, J., and Thompson, L. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), pp.10-25, (p.11); Brown, J., *Agriculture in England: a Survey of Farming 1870-1947* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p.76.

⁴ Howkins, A., *The Death of Rural England: a Social History of the English Countryside since 1900* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.5; Caird, J., *English Agriculture in 1850-51* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1968; 1st published in 1851), p.ii.

conditioned by farming. If Stanley Baldwin were to be believed in his estimation that, 'The countryside is England and England is the countryside,'⁵ the dangers of the decay of rural society which Lord Hastings and the CLA were making concomitant with that of agriculture would be an issue of national importance. Thus, it can be seen that any study of English agriculture in the interwar period is destined to encounter issues of a much wider social, political and cultural nature than merely the economics of farming. Farmers, as the predominant sector of business operators of the agricultural community were a key component of rural society and their importance within the countryside was increasing.⁶ The interaction of farmers with the issues of a wider social, political and cultural nature and the effects upon small-scale farmers are a concern of this thesis.

This chapter begins by examining the way in which farmers and their supporters managed to create an image of their affliction by depression during the interwar years which became the predominant theme in the subsequent historiography. The thesis will conclude by investigating both the extent to which the social positions and cultural practices of large-scale farmers as members of the dominant class were crucial in the maintenance both of their own competitive advantage, occurring as a result of their common interest with other rural and ruralist class fractions, and the disadvantage of small-scale competitors. This investigation begins in this chapter, however, through

⁵ Mansfield, N., 'Farmworkers, Local Identity and Conservatism, 1914-1930', in *The English Countryside between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?*, ed. by Brassley, P., Burchardt, J., and Thompson, L. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), pp.176-86, (p.186).

⁶ Woods, M., 'Discourses of Power and Rurality: Local Politics in Somerset in the Twentieth Century', *Political Geography*, 16 6, (1997), 453-78, (p.464).

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the demonstration of the support that farmers received from various quarters during and after the interwar years. A picture is then sketched of the development of the historiography of interwar English agriculture and a suggestion is made as to why a reappraisal of the economic performance of the industry has taken so long to emerge. Some of the economic details of this belated challenge are then noted, the thrust of the challenge being that economic indicators suggest that difficulties in the industry seem to have been exaggerated in contemporary and historical accounts and that this has resulted in favourable treatment of agriculture by Governments since the 1930s. The representation by contemporary agriculturalists and ruralists and, as a result, by historians of interwar agriculture as a unitary economic sector which pays little attention to differentials in the scale of farm businesses will become apparent. The context will thereby begin to be established for an examination of the adverse consequences for small-scale farmers of some of the legislation that emerged as a result of the account of the existence of agricultural depression created during the interwar years. This demonstrates the requirement for histories of the period to implement an approach that recognises the political and economic advantages possessed by the operators of large-scale businesses dependent on considerable inputs of capital and upon hired labour. This chapter begins to fulfil that requirement.

Agriculture and Economy in Interwar Rural England: a History of Depression

The relative neglect of the study of the English agriculture of the years from 1919 to 1939 might perhaps reflect the apparent mundanity of the subject area when contrasted with those wider issues of political diplomacy and international economy of the time that generally take centre stage. There has been until recently a shortage of specialist histories of interwar rural England and its agriculture despite the attention paid by Alun Howkins in *The Death of Rural England* and Edith Whetham's earlier contribution to *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*.⁷ Work on interwar English agriculture is usually to be found either at the tail end of work on the depression in farming that began in 1875 and which is considered to have continued until the Second World War, as is the case with the studies by Richard Perren and Jonathan Brown, or in the middle of work covering a much longer span of time, Howard Newby's *Country Life: a Social History of Rural England* and David Grigg's *English Agriculture: a Historical Perspective* serving as good examples of this tendency. Howkins' text, cited above, actually embraces the whole of the twentieth century and, at the other extreme, John Martin begins his study of British farming in 1931.⁸

It is noticeable that histories written in the 1980s and 1990s and even in the twenty-first century perpetuate a particular version of the history of

⁷ Howkins, *Death of Rural England*; Whetham, E. H., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, Volume 8: 1914-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

⁸ Howkins, *Death of Rural England*; Perren, R., *Agriculture in Depression: 1870-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Grigg, D., *English Agriculture: an Historical Perspective* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989); Brown, *Agriculture*; Newby, H., *Country Life: a Social History of Rural England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1987).

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English agriculture that is present in the earlier work of Sir Keith Murray, of Peter Self and Herbert J. Storing and of Edith Whetham, that describes a decline in the industry that began in the 1870s and culminated at the end of the depressed interwar years.⁹ This version of agricultural decline has, until recently, dominated the history of agriculture and, hence, of the countryside.¹⁰ Newby, despite acceding to the reinterpretation of the period from 1870 to 1939 as one of the structural change in agriculture later elucidated by Joan Thirsk,¹¹ offered the following in 1987:

From 1875 until 1939, with only a brief respite during and immediately after the First World War, British agriculture was in a state of chronic depression, characterized by falling commodity prices, lower rents, increasing bankruptcies and an unkempt rural landscape.¹²

F.M.L. Thompson wrote in 1991 that depression, as opposed to being rife amongst farmers before the First World War, '...was something that happened, rather, in the interwar years.'¹³ This image of agricultural depression is reflected in the very titles of some orthodox economic histories; for example, Perren, despite acknowledging the features of structural change recognised by

⁹ Short, B., Watkins, C., and Martin, J., "'The Front Line of Freedom': State-Led Agricultural Revolution in Britain, 1939-45", in *The Front Line of Freedom: British Farming in the Second World War*, ed. by Short, B., Watkins, C., and Martin, J. (Exeter: British Agricultural History Society, 2006), pp.1-15, (p.4); Martin, J., *The Development of Modern Agriculture: British Farming since 1931* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p.5; Whetham, *Agrarian History*; Self, P., and Storing, H.J., *The State and the Farmer* (London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1962); Murray, K.A.H., *Agriculture: History of the Second World War* (London: HMSO, 1955).

¹⁰ Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, p.2.

¹¹ Thirsk, J., *Alternative Agriculture: a History from the Black Death to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp.147-222.

¹² Newby, *Country Life*, pp.104-5.

¹³ Thompson, F.M.L., 'An Anatomy of English Agriculture, 1870-1914', in *Land, Labour and Agriculture, 1700-1920: Essays for Gordon Mingay*, ed. by Holderness, B.A, and Turner, M. (London: Hambledon Press, 1991), pp.211-40, (p.213).

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Newby, titled his 1995 work which spans the period 1870 to 1940, *Agriculture in Depression*.¹⁴ Subsequent work embracing agriculture in its economic relations with rural society in the interwar period exists but often as a chapter or a theme in a wider ranging study, such as in work by Clare Griffiths or Jeremy Burchardt,¹⁵ and charts a course from 1918 to 1939 through agricultural hardship and social upheaval¹⁶ where it is not eliding the economics of the industry altogether. This is especially true with regard to questions of the various rural class relationships that might result from the different scales of farm operations and the accompanying variations in the social relations of production of farmers. An alternative approach exists of the very specialist local, almost anthropological, approach. Alwyn Rees' 1950 study, for example, has the advantage of being researched in the interwar years and of involving the study of a parish with considerable numbers of small-scale farmers but the disadvantage in terms of this study of England of being based in a Welsh parish.¹⁷ Rees, in terms of social relations, is somewhat contradictory; for example, having stated that, 'Class distinction is comparatively weak in Llanfanhangel', Rees proceeds to differentiate 'large farmers', who seek to 'emulate their social betters', from other farmers.¹⁸ Rees does not examine the effects of such behaviour on small-scale farmers in the way that this present study aspires to do and, in accordance with later written histories, makes no economic distinction between farmers of differing

¹⁴ Perren, *Agriculture*, pp.68-70.

¹⁵ Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside: the Politics of Rural Britain, 1918-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Burchardt, J., *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change in England since 1800* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002).

¹⁶ Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, pp.27-142.

¹⁷ Rees, A.D., *Life in a Welsh Countryside* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1961).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.142, 147.

scales when recounting the same tale of depression in which 'the profits of the thirties were extremely meagre'.¹⁹

It appears that the history of agriculture in the interwar period which was written during the second half of the twentieth century is one of serious and all-consuming depression. The point is made that livestock farming was less hard hit, overall, than arable farming²⁰ but scant need appears to have been felt to make much distinction between the fortunes of farmers of differing scales. The question arises as to the nature of the evidence for this gloomy and overarching assessment; an answer is given in the following section.

A Construction of Depression

Little doubt can exist that the perception of historians writing after the Second World War of the difficulties of interwar agriculture was influenced by august commentators from the late 1930s who reflected a general mood in the need to address what they saw as existent problems in British agriculture. Agriculture was regarded by observers from across the political spectrum as having suffered serious difficulties in the interwar period, Howkins citing the Conservative M.P. Viscount Lymington, from the Right, and, from the Left, the 1939 work of Lord Addison in support of this view.²¹ Both Brown and Cooper have detailed the generally affable relationship that might be expected to have

¹⁹ Ibid., p.30.

²⁰ Martin, *Development*, pp.12-15; Perren, p.69; Brown, *Agriculture*, p.89.

²¹ Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, p.12.

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existed between farmers, as rural business owners, and the Conservative Party which survived a measure of strain during the 1920s and worked considerably in farmers' interests in the 1930s.²² Griffiths has demonstrated that the Labour Party, for whom Addison had served as Minister of Agriculture during the Government of 1929 to 1931, was prepared neither to commit to the nationalization of the land as a solution to the problems it had accepted agriculture to be suffering nor the abandonment of the rural vote. There was clearly division within the Party over the role that farmers themselves played in the difficulties they faced and the extent of their exaggeration of them; however, the party's general shift during the 1930s towards the recognition that farmers needed to be embraced in an industry of service to the nation,²³ as part of what Winter refers to as the developing 'agricultural corporatism' within a nascent liberal corporate state,²⁴ shows that Labour was undoubtedly accepting of the notion that the fortunes of agriculture needed addressing following long-term problems that were exacerbated in the interwar years. Addison articulated the ongoing decline of the land and its industry in his 1939 work, *A Policy for British Agriculture*,²⁵ but, despite distinguishing smallholders and family farmers from those of larger scale, failed to identify any structural

²² Brown, J., 'Agricultural Policy and the National Farmers' Union, 1908-1939', in *Agriculture and Politics in England, 1815-1939*, ed. by Wordie, J.R. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp.178-98; Cooper, A. F., *British Agricultural Policy 1912 – 1936: a Study in Conservative Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989).

²³ Griffiths, *Labour*, pp.258-90.

²⁴ Winter, M., *Rural Politics: Policies for Agriculture, Forestry and the Environment* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.19, 71-99.

²⁵ Right Honourable Lord Addison of Stallingborough, *A Policy for British Agriculture*, (London: Victor Gollancz Limited, 1939).

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problems for small-scale farmers, blaming lack of marketing sense for any of the economic difficulties they shared with the rest of agriculture.²⁶

The links of Viscount Astor to the Liberals, the traditional party of *laissez faire*, make it perhaps a little surprising that he would display sympathy for a farming interest that made considerable claims for and received Government aid;²⁷ however, having undertaken and published the results of studies of the industry in the 1930s, notably with B. Seebom Rowntree, and despite his opposition to subsidies for wheat and sugar beet,²⁸ his opinion, published in 1938, was that no previous depression in world agriculture had been as deep as that of the 1930s²⁹ and the book that contained it would clearly have been influential. *British Agriculture: the Principles of Future Policy* undoubtedly had an audience as the second edition makes clear, the 456 page first edition being widely available and having 'had a good reception in the press and satisfactory sales.'³⁰

The term 'depression' was also applied to agriculture freely in the interwar years by agricultural economists and other experts. The ideological positions of agricultural economists, in spite of some such as A.W. Ashby and Joseph Duncan having links with agricultural trade unionism,³¹ were

²⁶ Ibid., p.43.

²⁷ Lord Ernle, *English Farming, Past and Present*, 6th edn. (London: Heinemann, 1961; this edn. 1st published 1936), p.418; Orwin, C. S., *A History of English Farming* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1949), p.91.

²⁸ Viscount Astor and Seebom Rowntree, B., *British Agriculture: the Principles of Future Policy*, 2nd edn. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1939), p.272.

²⁹ Ibid., p.43.

³⁰ Ibid., p.vii.

³¹ Whetham, E.H., *Agricultural Economists in Britain 1900–1940* (Oxford: Agricultural Economics Institute, [1981(?)]), pp.34–5.

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conditioned by economic orthodoxy and thus supportive of those strata of those members of the dominant class with interests in agriculture and rural society; agricultural economists were defending, effectively, their own interests in the countryside, as is reflected in their acceptance of the existence of depression. The landowner and farmer Cecil Dampier-Whetham used the term 'depression' in regard to agriculture in the first sentence of his 1927 publication, *Politics and the Land*, whilst talks given to the Agricultural Economics Society and published in its journal included the word 'depression' in the 1929 titles by A.W. Ashby, by Ashby and J.L. Davies, by R.R. Enfield and by R.J. Thompson. Enfield proceeded in 1935 to talk of the likelihood or otherwise of 'recovery' from the 'depression' in agriculture that he mentioned in the first sentence of his article of that year and which, 'in its extent and severity', he considered to be, 'probably the most serious recorded in the world as a whole.'³² The historian, K.A.H. Murray, the writer of the official history of agriculture during the Second World War, was a member of, and attendee and questioning contributor at, the Agricultural Economics Society.³³

The assumption must not be made that the expert opinion cited above was uncritical in its acceptance of the existence of depression in agriculture or

³² Ashby, A.W., 'Some Human and Social Factors in the Depression', *Journal of the Proceedings of the Agricultural Economics Society*, 1 2, (1929), 89-99; Ashby, A.W., and Davies, J.L., 'Farming Efficiency and the Agricultural Depression', *Journal of the Proceedings of the Agricultural Economics Society*, 1 2, (1929), 100-8; Enfield, R.R., 'Some Economic Causes of the Agricultural Depression', *Journal of the Proceedings of the Agricultural Economics Society*, 1 2, (1929), 117-28; Enfield, R.R., 'The Expectation of Agricultural Recovery', *Journal of the Proceedings of the Agricultural Economics Society*, 4 1, (1935), 14-43, (p.14); Thompson, R.J., 'Some Indication of the Nature and Extent of the Present Agricultural Depression', *Journal of the Proceedings of the Agricultural Economics Society*, 1 2, (1929), 38-51; Dampier-Whetham, C., *Politics and the Land* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), p.1.

³³ Hinton, R.C., 'The Agricultural Marketing Act, 1933', *Journal of the Proceedings of the Agricultural Economics Society*, 3 2, (1933), 70-81, (p.79).

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of its causes but there is little doubt that the involvement of its authors as part of the agricultural community brought them into contact with a representation by farmers and their supporters of the economic hardship that was claimed to be afflicting the industry and that they tended, unwittingly or otherwise, to reproduce this version. The agricultural economists, D. Skilbeck and M. Messer, highlighted the role of the supporters of agriculture in creating the image of depression, writing in 1929, 'the daily press has filled its readers' minds with the proximity of the financial failure of the English countryside.'³⁴ Indeed, abundant evidence exists from within the agricultural community and its supporters of the creation of a perception of existing depression in the industry from 1921 onwards through the interwar years to which contemporary commentators would have been exposed. A letter to the farmers' newspaper, the *Mark Lane Express*, from October 1921 summed up the farmers' view of their position:

All but compulsory purchase of one's holding; shortage of enough capital and stock to run it with; prices of corn and all livestock, abandoned to the mercies of foreign competition, tumbling down headlong; rates and taxes going up; and war wages and bonuses to be modified to a reasonable level as best you can, are enough to try the stoutest hearted farmer.³⁵

³⁴ Skilbeck, D., and Messer, M., 'The Incidence of Notices to Quit and Rent Reductions as an Indicator of Farming Conditions', *Journal of the Proceedings of the Agricultural Economics Society*, 12, (1929), 52-65, (p.52).

³⁵ *Mark Lane Express*, 17 October 1921.

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Farmers who purchased their holdings found owner-occupation often to be a burden.³⁶ A significant increase in the owner-occupation of farms by farmers took place between 1918 and 1927 and was often the result of a desire amongst landowners to divest themselves of landed assets, a process whereby farmers in some cases were effectively forced to buy their farms if they wished to remain farming them in a market where demand for land was high, forcing up prices.³⁷ Many farmers, partly as a result of what Ministry of Agriculture (MAF) documents from 1923 referred to as 'the resultant competition among purchasers' and 'the keenness of the demand for land',³⁸ found themselves with heavy mortgages, the payments of which were higher than had been their previous rent.³⁹ The emotional pressure to buy was high for many farmers since, as was observed in the documents, 'In many cases they bought in order to avoid being turned out of the homes which their families had occupied for generations.'⁴⁰ The emotional pressure may have contributed further to a feeling of malaise, but, if nothing else, there were farmers affected financially by this condition for whom the impression of a miring in depression could have seemed very real.

Howkins has concluded that agricultural depression is evident in the interwar years but was concentrated principally in the years from 1922 to 1925

³⁶ Sturme, S.G., 'Owner-Farming in England and Wales, 1900 to 1950', in *Essays in Agrarian History, Volume 2*, ed. by Minchington, W.E. (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1968), pp.283-306.

³⁷ Rotherey, M., 'The Wealth of the English Landed Gentry', *Agricultural History Review*, 55 2, (2007), 251-68, (pp.259-60).

³⁸ NA/MAF/53/64, *Papers Relating to the Agricultural Credits Bill 1923*.

³⁹ Thompson, F.M.L., *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p.334.

⁴⁰ NA/MAF/53/64.

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and 1929 to 1932.⁴¹ Difficulties amongst farmers during the earlier period are, indeed, reflected in the following evidence from 1923. The *NFU Record*, the journal published monthly by the National Farmers' Union, was publishing details of a speech given in the House of Commons regarding levels of bankruptcy amongst farmers: it noted that 'Lt. Col. Buckley gave a table showing farmers' receiving orders and deeds of arrangements' which had been increasing steadily since the end of the First World War, numbering as follows: 30 in 1918, 33 in 1919, 44 in 1920, 285 in 1921, 404 in 1922.⁴² Whilst these numbers are low relative to the total number of farmers, they are demonstrably increasing and papers relating to the Agricultural Credits Bill of 1923 suggest that farmers were also choosing to retire from farming rather than face bankruptcy,⁴³ this being a familiar course of action during farming depression, as revealed by the agricultural economist R.J. Thompson who indicated its reoccurrence at the time of the depression of 1929.⁴⁴ However, that the supporters of agriculture were anxious to highlight misfortune in the industry during the years that fell between the two periods of depression mentioned above is substantiated by the following extract from *The Times*, that media bastion of the dominant class, in 1926:

The past 18 months have been critical for the agricultural industry, and the state of farming finances, it is now generally agreed, has not within living memory been so consistently adverse as is the case at this

⁴¹ Howkins, 'Death and Rebirth?', p.13.

⁴² *NFU Record*, June 1923.

⁴³ NA/MAF/53/64.

⁴⁴ Thompson, R.J., p.38.

juncture. As a rule, in past depressions, one or more branches have served to relieve the situation, but there is barely the semblance of a bright spot this time, and reserves against low markets have diminished to vanishing point. The disturbing feature in the position and outlook is not in any appreciable modification in the systems of farming, but in the exhausted state of the financial resources in and behind the industry.⁴⁵

The same story of difficulty and depression was being repeated by the summer of 1927, this time with the wholehearted support of the *Daily Mail*. The newspaper's proprietor, Lord Rothermere, could be relied upon to back the causes of farmers,⁴⁶ as the following excerpt from an interview with the baronet, Sir Cuthbert Quilter, demonstrates, simultaneously advertising the existent condition in which agriculturalists considered themselves to be and the newspaper's own support for them:

We are very grateful to the *Daily Mail* for what it is doing for the farmer [...] Of the 10,000 acres I own, I farm 3,000 myself, because, owing to the condition of the industry I cannot let the land although it is good land. My five farms were all let at a loss last year.⁴⁷

The previous week had seen a similar conjunction of praise for the newspaper's support for farmers and the incidence of economic troubles in agriculture:

⁴⁵ *The Times*, 6 June 1926.

⁴⁶ Cooper, *Conservative Politics*, p.121.

⁴⁷ *Daily Mail*, 8 June 1927.

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Farmers are living on their credit. They admit that the banks have been splendid in these difficult years; but the banks are reaching the limits of their help [...] Mr F.W. Wateridge of Barcombe, Sussex, writes: "Everyone, whether they be farmers or members of the whole community of consumers, must be indebted to you for bringing before the public the dire requirements of agriculture."⁴⁸

The paper's rural correspondent was reporting that farmers were short of capital, to which statements from farmers in Northumberland and Yorkshire gave testimony.⁴⁹ Other farmers were not only failing to make profit in 1927 but were finding it necessary to liquidate capital or fall back on their investments in order to run their farms:

One of the best known and successful farmers in the Eastern Counties said to me: "This year I sold out £900 worth of securities. I sold out another £900 to pay my way. What about the farmers with no securities to sell?"⁵⁰

The chairman of the Cornwall branch of the NFU, Mr. Digory Stout, was indicating that recent times had been the worst that he could remember in 24 years as an independent farmer and that he had found it 'quite impossible in the last three years to balance my accounts, let alone get any interest on any capital.'⁵¹ Other Cornish farmers continued the account of woe to the agricultural correspondent complaining of the low prices they received for their

⁴⁸ *Daily Mail*, 1 June 1927.

⁴⁹ *Daily Mail*, 9 June 1927.

⁵⁰ *Daily Mail*, 8 June 1927.

⁵¹ *Daily Mail*, 10 June 1927.

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produce and of the high prices of the inputs that they required to run their farms, from the cost of repairing farm implements and the price of carpentry to the prices of machinery, such as binders, mowers and threshing tackle, to the cost of feeding stuffs which they suggested were 'more than fifty per cent above pre-war prices'.⁵²

Stevenson and Cook have written of the 1930s, the decade after the 'great slump' that followed the Wall Street crash of 24 October 1929, as having been affected by the 'popular mythology' which has painted a picture merely of mass unemployment, dole queues and hunger marches.⁵³ This has created a collage of desperation, the 'Hungry Thirties', which was continuing to have an influence on politics in the 1990s but which is one that it has been the norm for historians to repeat with ever greater emphasis since the 1960s, that fails to address the other two of the three Englands that J.B. Priestley observed in 1934, both of which were prosperous.⁵⁴ One of these prosperous Englands was rural and traditional, 'complete with squires, fox hunting, and gnarled yokels', according to Taylor.⁵⁵ This tends to suggest that even Howkins might be exaggerating the extent of agricultural depression in the latter half of the interwar years, despite limiting its occurrence to the years from 1929 to 1932, were it not for the mitigation of Taylor's subsequent

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Stevenson, J., and Cook, C., *Britain in the Depression: Society and Politics 1929-1939* (New York: Longman, 1994), pp.10-11.

⁵⁴ Gardiner, J., *The Thirties: an Intimate History* (London: Harper Press, 2010), p.27; Stevenson and Cook, p.11; Perkin, H., *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880* (London: Routledge, 2002; 1st published 1989), p.268; Branson, N., and Heinemann, M., *Britain in the 1930s* (St. Albans: Panther, 1973), p.291; Taylor, A.J.P., *English History, 1914-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988; 1st published 1965), p.301.

⁵⁵ Taylor, A.J.P., *English History*, p.301.

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remark that the lifestyles of the gentry were 'sustained no doubt more from dividends than from agricultural rents'.⁵⁶ The statement from Sir Cuthbert Quilter Bart., noted above, certainly supports Taylor's suggestion that the rental incomes of landowners might have decreased, which is suggestive of problems of payment amongst their farmer tenants. This, in conjunction with the apparent lack of willing farm tenants noted by Quilter that was forcing landowners such as himself to take farms 'in hand' and cultivate the land themselves are both tendencies suggestive of depression in the agricultural industry in the early 1930s.⁵⁷ Written sources exist alongside Priestley's work that contrast with his affirmation of rural prosperity; in combination with Priestly, they suggest that there may well have been both prosperity and decline in the countryside and, whilst the former was enjoyed by the most visible residents of the countryside, the latter was affecting at least some of those engaged in the foremost productive rural industry: agriculture.

The existence of agricultural difficulties during the early 1930s is substantiated by the reporting in the ostensibly rural newspaper, the *Lincolnshire and Boston Guardian*, in its downbeat agricultural coverage of April 4 1931 of a recent suicide under the headline, 'Farmer found drowned in River Bain'; there followed a distressing account of the tragedy which stated, 'There was a rope attached around the deceased's neck and to the rope was tied a four stone weight.' Complementary to such emotive reportage are the pleas from farmers' organizations for Government help for their members. By

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Thompson, F.M.L., 'English Landed Society in the Twentieth Century III: Self-Help and Outdoor Relief', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6 2, (1992), 1-24, (p.23).

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mid-March of 1932, the CCA's treasurer, V.A. Malcolmson, was reporting in a memorandum to MAF that 'so deep and of such long duration has been the agricultural depression, especially in the Eastern counties', that it had exhausted farmers' credit and working capital and Malcolmson was suggesting the necessity of an emergency sum of credit of £20 million being made available to farmers. A Ministry memorandum containing the minutes of a subsequent meeting with Malcolmson continued to say that he had consulted with the Westminster, National Provincial and Barclays banks and that, 'The position was that between £30,000,000 and £40,000,000 had been advanced to farmers and this was at present irrecoverable. Any fresh credit that could be found for the farmers would help the banks to recover.'⁵⁸ Depression was still being represented as afflicting agriculture by 1935, three years after the period that Howkins has stated the most serious difficulties had been felt and it becomes apparent from the agricultural newspaper, the *Farmer's Weekly*, that the position outlined in the memoranda had indeed materialised. Farmers, according to the newspaper, were in many cases using loans from the Agricultural Mortgage Corporation, taken 'at a comparatively high rate of interest', simply to repay existing loans. This demonstrates that it was not merely during the periods of the most severe economic depression for agriculture that farmers represented their ability to continue to operate as being compromised but also that the repercussions could tend to be felt for some time afterwards. The *Farmer's Weekly* appeared to be referring to ongoing depression in 1935 when it stated, 'Economic depression in the

⁵⁸ NA/D/4/11, *Central Chambers of Agriculture Emergency Credit Proposals 1932*.

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industry has operated to destroy a great deal of farming capital.⁵⁹ The minutes of the Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge, collected from late 1934 into 1935 contain a series of lamentations from farmers and their supporters on the state of agriculture, with tithe being but one factor quoted as a source of problems. Mr. A. Rackham of Norfolk summed up the farmers' version of their position with the following statement:

We are up against the cold competition of the whole world in regard to our farm produce. We have no control over our outgoings, we have to pay a certain price for the things we buy and in addition to that here are the tithe owners coming along and pressing us for the tithe [...] We are hard up against it with our backs to the wall and we are facing bankruptcy unless something happens [...] Land has depreciated to a great extent and the farm produce has depreciated as well, while our overhead charges stand at the same level.⁶⁰

The characterization of agriculture as afflicted by economic hardship was still current in farmers' periodicals in 1936 when the *NFU Record* was publishing details of the Union's deputation to the Prime Minister which was received at 10 Downing Street on 5 May of that year. The visit was preceded by a letter signed by Cleveland Fyfe, the Union's general secretary, which was published in the June 1936 edition of the publication and contained the following expression of despair, beginning with the request that British

⁵⁹ *Farmer's Weekly*, 8 November 1935.

⁶⁰ Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge, *Minutes of Evidence*, p.332.

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agriculture receive preferential treatment from the Government with regards to foreign competition:

In the Union's view, the whole situation is dominated by the question as to whether existing trade agreements (including, of course, the Ottawa Agreements) will be so modified as to enable the home producer to be given first place in the home market [...] The assistance under the Livestock Act has done no more than stave off a complete collapse of the industry [...] the production of milk has not been placed on a sound or profitable basis[...] the Milk Marketing Board have been obliged to impose crippling levies on the registered producers under the scheme [...] Can we [...] enable the Potato Marketing Board to obviate disastrous price fluctuations by the maintenance of adequate regulation of imports and of customs duties? [...] The plight of barley-growers is such that we are bound to enquire whether it is the intention of the Government to take prompt action to improve their situation [...] Registered producers under existing [Agricultural Marketing Acts] Schemes, however, are so dissatisfied with the inadequate control of competing imports that it is obvious that it would be impossible to expect farmers to give their support to further schemes [...] We have abundant evidence of the feeling of doubt and insecurity that exists amongst our branches throughout the counties of England and Wales.

Major R.H. Dorman-Smith, the Union's president, made the following statement during the interview with the Prime Minister with regard to the

issues in the above letter that he reiterated were affecting agriculture so badly:

I am anxious to avoid overstating our case. On the other hand, we should be lacking in our duty to the farmers of the country and indeed to the Government itself if we sought in any way to minimise its seriousness.⁶¹

Evidence presented above shows that farmers and their supporters were demonstrably willing to sustain a resolute argument that emphasised the existence of adverse economic conditions as a defence of their interests throughout the 1920s and 1930s. As the extracts from the *NFU Record* suggest, farmers had a well-developed understanding of themselves as victims of Government policies on agriculture. It should perhaps not be surprising that groups of economic producers, such as farmers, might be open to the accusation that they exaggerated the difficulties that they faced as a result of general economic conditions in order to maximise the sympathy and support they received from Government, but support for their representation of their industry as in distress came from other sources. By 1938, support for the accuracy of farmers' representation of their distressed conditions that resulted from Government policy was forthcoming from the unlikely source of the *Land Worker*, the monthly publication of the National Union of Agricultural Workers (NUAW). The July 1938 edition carried coverage of the biennial conference of the NUAW and contained the following:

⁶¹ *NFU Record*, June 1936.

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Bro. E.T. Lawrence moved a composite resolution: "This conference deplores the Government's neglect to ensure proper cultivation of land and calls the Government's serious attention to the drift of skilled farm workers from the countryside to the towns, owing to lack of suitable cottages and neglect of cultivation."⁶²

Despite the barely veiled criticism of farmers' behaviour with regard to the 'tied' cottages that they rented to their workers and the fact that the 'neglect of cultivation' tended sometimes to be a criticism that farmworkers' leaders made of farmers' methods similar to those voiced during the meeting between a deputation from the Trades Union Congress (TUC) General Council and the Ministers for Agriculture and for Health in 1926,⁶³ the disapproval of the Government's perceived lack of support to agriculture is clear. Whereas a later comment from the trade union's president that the solution to problems in agriculture was that 'the land should be nationalised'⁶⁴ was clearly at variance with the desire of farmers,⁶⁵ it might be assumed from the following comment from the August edition of the *Land Worker* that workers and farmers had come to some sort of unlikely agreement:

There are millions of acres in Britain which could produce very much more food if farmers could afford the necessary equipment and if there were the men to work on the land. The greater number of men

⁶² *Land Worker*, July 1938.

⁶³ NA/MAF/48/206, *Trades Union Congress General Council: Deputation to Ministers of Health and Agriculture, 1926*.

⁶⁴ *Land Worker*, July 1938.

⁶⁵ Griffiths, *Labour*, p.263.

required for Arable production has meant that farmers have had to lay down more land to grass.⁶⁶

Such an assumption of detente might be dismissed once it is recognised that the article from which the extract comes was published under the title, 'Let Agriculture Expand: the Farmers' View'. The message is clear, however, once again that farmers desired it to be known that they had been frustrated by their adverse economic circumstances and, as implied by the plea in the title, by some other restraining force which can only be presumed to be the authority of the State.

The question of why the *Land Worker* was apparently giving any support to farmers might be asked, given its tradition of hostility to them.⁶⁷ In reality, both articles were obviously published with one eye on the political events of the moment: 'Bro.' Lawrence had stated in the July 1938 article that, 'He thought the land was a country's first line of defence', the August 'Farmers' View' article proceeding to state that 'common sense should point to the necessity of having a vigorous agriculture in time of war'.⁶⁸ The 'time of war' was the apparent inevitability in the summer of 1938 of imminent war with Germany during a period when the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, was engaging in 'shuttle diplomacy' in an attempt to avoid conflict over Hitler's designs on Czechoslovakia.⁶⁹ It appears that only the threat of war and the deployment of the appeal to 'common sense' could achieve the 'common

⁶⁶ *Land Worker*, August 1938.

⁶⁷ Griffiths, *Labour*, p.261.

⁶⁸ *Land Worker*, August 1938.

⁶⁹ Hattersley, R., *Borrowed Time: the Story of Britain between the Wars* (London: Little-Brown, 2007), p.412.

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sense' rural social unity inclusive of agricultural labourers for which farmers had long called, as instanced in the *Journal of the Central and Associated Chambers of Agriculture and the Agricultural Record* of June 1929.⁷⁰ Calls from farmers for such unity, in reality, must be recognised to be an attempt to veil their peace-time desire for increased social control of their labour force. Social control would be made possible if wage bargaining could proceed outside of any restraints imposed by legislative bodies such as the Agricultural Wages Board.⁷¹ Employing farmers, especially farmers of arable land, expected that such control would have allowed them to make the level of profit that they perceived that only workers unprotected by Government legislation could have produced for them, as will be shown in later chapters; such an expectation of increased profits may have been theoretically realistic, as it happens, but increases would certainly have been limited by the price falls taking place in agriculture from 1921 onwards as a result of global over-production.⁷²

Notions of 'common sense', as invoked in the 'Farmers' View' article, above, are deeply suspect and the motives of those employing them should be questioned rigorously, according to Pierre Bourdieu who recognises that 'common sense' constitutes a 'primary naiveté' that conceals an 'objective

⁷⁰ *The Journal of the Central and Associated Chambers of Agriculture and the Agricultural Record*, June 1929.

⁷¹ Penning-Rowsell, E. C., 'Who "Betrayed" Whom? Power and Politics in the 1920/21 Agricultural Crisis', *Agricultural History Review*, 45 2, (1997), 176-94.

⁷² Orwin, *English Farming*, pp.84-6.

truth'.⁷³ The 'primary naiveté' in the above example of the 'vigorous agriculture' necessary in 'time of war' conceals the 'objective truth', implied by the necessity of farmers being 'able to afford the necessary equipment', that farmers were currently short of capital and, thus, of profit. Furthermore, the emotive call for 'the men to work the land', which appears superficially to be a plea for employment to be provided for working class men, conceals the 'objective truth', it would appear, that farmers, although they were highly unlikely to have derived the knowledge from Marx, were intuitively aware that employees constituted the source of their profit. Marx painstakingly demonstrates that labour power is the original source of value and surplus value the source of profit⁷⁴ and shows that this is demonstrably true regardless of the proportions in which the total profit might ultimately be distributed amongst those involved in production and those in the realm of circulation,⁷⁵ the latter including the 'middlemen' so often derided as profiteering at the expense of farmers.⁷⁶ A shortage of 'men to work the land' again implies that agriculture, in its entirety, rather than merely farmers alone, was facing problems not of its own design and is suggestive of some social benefit that would be derived from the giving of some external aid to farmers that would be morally right but, at the time, was being withheld. The short statement from the *Land Worker* of August 1938 with its references to shortages of

⁷³ Bourdieu, P., 'The Practice of Reflexive Sociology (the Paris Workshop)', in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, ed. by Bourdieu, P., and Wacquant, L.J.D. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008; 1st published 1992), pp.217-60, (pp.250-1).

⁷⁴ Marx, K., *Capital: Volume 1* (London: Penguin, 1990; 1st published 1867), pp.125-246.

⁷⁵ Marx, K., *Capital: Volume 3* (London: Penguin, 1991; 1st published 1894), pp.241-316, 459-728.

⁷⁶ *British Farmer*, 17 September 1921; Manton, K., 'Playing both Sides against the Middle: the Labour Party and the Wholesaling Industry, 1919-1951', *Twentieth Century British History*, 18 3, (2007), 306-33, (pp.310-15).

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equipment and, thus, capital and the associated inability to create employment can, thus, be seen to be pregnant with meaning pertaining to the perception of the impoverishment of farmers at that moment in time, a perception that was merely the culmination of a message repeated regularly enough to become dogma. Of such a process, Bourdieu states:

The force of the preconstructed resides in the fact that, being inscribed in things and in minds, it presents itself under the cloak of the self-evident which goes unnoticed because it is by definition taken for granted.⁷⁷

These articles from the *Land Worker* and the previously given examples demonstrate that the idea of a depressed agriculture was being established throughout the interwar years and, as suggested, was 'preconstructed' and 'self-evident' enough to enter into the histories of the period written after the Second World War.

The evidence presented here, however, shows that little significance was attached to the particular needs of any particular group of farmers, especially as differentiated by size. Any specific problems mentioned tended to centre on arable farming which was undertaken to a greater extent in the southern and eastern areas where larger farms predominated but there is no mention of the varying scales of undertaking general to different branches of agriculture, such as cereal production. Small-scale farmers were not considered separately in a tale being told of depression that was represented

⁷⁷ Bourdieu, 'Practice', pp.250-1.

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as enveloping agriculture as a whole and, given the preponderance of farms of less than fifty acres in size, these still making up at least 60 percent of all farms in England in 1939, this must be regarded as surprising, especially since this demonstrates that the needs of a large majority of producers were either being largely ignored or did not exist.⁷⁸ It will be shown later in this work that the difficulties experienced by the smallholders established under various ideologically informed Government initiatives⁷⁹ were, indeed, recognised but that concern for their welfare failed to extend to incumbent small-scale farmers. Such ignorance along with a general unwillingness to assess the effects of economic conditions on the actual numbers of existing farmers will be seen to be reproduced in the re-evaluation of the extent of depression that has been undertaken recently which is depicted in the next section.

Historical Evaluation of Depression

Brassley and Collins have both presented papers questioning the validity of the assumption that agriculture was beset by depression throughout the interwar years.⁸⁰ The pictures both of agricultural decline and rural social decomposition have been further challenged in the 2006 work, *The English Countryside between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline*, in which Howkins

⁷⁸ Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Agricultural Statistics: Report on the Acreage under Crops and the Number of Live Stock in England and Wales, 1939, Volume 74* (London: HMSO, 1939), Table 11 (pp.38-9).

⁷⁹ Lockwood, C.A., 'From Soldier to Peasant? The Land Settlement Scheme in East Sussex, 1919 - 1939', *Albion*, 30, (1998), 439-62.

⁸⁰ Brassley, P., paper for the Interwar Rural History Research Group Conference at Manchester Metropolitan University 16 October 2002 (unpublished paper, 2002); Collins, E.J.T., paper for the Interwar Rural History Research Group Conference at Manchester Metropolitan University 16 October 2002 (unpublished paper, 2002).

limits the periods of interwar agricultural depression to 1922 to 1925 and 1929 to 1932.⁸¹ The book is styled as 'revisionist' by its editors, Paul Brassley, Jeremy Burchardt and Lynne Thompson, who make the point notably that, 'from whatever point of view one looks at the countryside in this period, there is abundant evidence of vitality and new growth, while the evidence for decline is less compelling than has usually been assumed.'⁸² The contributions from various authors generally take a culturalist approach, most of them addressing somewhat elitist rural issues that are important to this thesis but avoid the political economy of agriculture;⁸³ nonetheless, between them, Brigden, Griffiths, Howkins, Mansfield and Sheail tackle some of the social and political aspects of pertinence to agriculture and Brassley examines the economics of interwar farming.⁸⁴ Importantly, Howkins, in concert with this revisionist

⁸¹ Howkins, 'Death and Rebirth?', pp.10-25.

⁸² Brassley, P., Burchardt, J., and Thompson, L., 'Conclusion', in *The English Countryside Between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?*, ed. by Brassley, P., Burchardt, J., and Thompson, L. (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), pp.235-49, (p.249).

⁸³ Examples of this culturalist approach include the following: Bailey, C., 'Rural Industries and the Image of the Countryside', in *The English Countryside between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?*, ed. by Brassley, P., Burchardt, J., and Thompson, L. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), pp.132-149; Brassley, P., 'The Wheelwright, the Carpenter, Two Ladies from Oxford, and the Construction of Socio-Economic Change in the Countryside between the Wars', in *The English Countryside between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?*, ed. by Brassley, P., Burchardt, J., and Thompson, L. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006c), pp.212-34; Burchardt, J., "'A New Rural Civilization': Village Halls, Community and Citizenship in the 1920s", in *The English Countryside between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?*, ed. by Brassley, P., Burchardt, J., and Thompson, L. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), pp.26-35; Jeremiah, D., 'Dartington Hall: a Landscape of an Experiment in Rural Reconstruction', in *The English Countryside between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?*, ed. by Brassley, P., Burchardt, J., and Thompson, L. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), pp.116-31; Wallis, M., 'Drama in the Village: Three Pioneers', in *The English Countryside between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?*, ed. by Brassley, P., Burchardt, J., and Thompson, L. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), pp.102-115.

⁸⁴ Brigden, R., 2006, 'Leckford: a Case-Study of Interwar Development', in *The English Countryside between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?*, ed. by Brassley, P., Burchardt, J., and Thompson, L. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), pp.200-11; Griffiths, C., 'Farming in the Public Interest: Constructing and Reconstructing Agriculture on the Political Left', in *The Contested Countryside: Rural Politics and Land Controversy in Modern Britain*, ed. by Burchardt, J., and Conford, P. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), pp.164-75; Howkins, 'Death and Rebirth?', pp.10-25; Mansfield, N., 'Farmworkers, Local Identity and Conservatism', pp.176-86;

theme, has made the argument briefly in his contribution that the incidence of depression was exaggerated in the interests of the farming community.⁸⁵ This will be developed in later chapters where it will be shown how representatives and supporters of the agricultural community were in a position to use their social capital in the form of social and political influence to gain Government support and protection for agriculture. This process depended upon uninterrupted publicity and agonising from representatives of farmers and their supporters which created a perception of a farming beset by economic woe, the consequences of which for rural society would be dire.

The legislation enacted by Government on behalf of farmers, which began in 1923 with relief of agricultural rates and developed into the 1930s,⁸⁶ shows that, as a sector of the economy, agriculture undoubtedly benefited disproportionately from State help in comparison to other industries.⁸⁷ This was due, it will be argued, to the association of rural England with the traditional ruling elite, but, it will be contended further, that small-scale farmers formed a significant section of those who prospered least from this attention if, indeed, many of them prospered at all. Despite the doubts as to the ingenuousness of farmers' representation of their interwar economic woes, the effectiveness with which farmers were able to make an argument for their affliction by depression is revealed by the legislation that was enacted to support them. The effectiveness of the pleading of their case is something

Sheail, J., 'Agriculture in the Wider Perspective', in *The English Countryside between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?*, ed. by Brassley, P., Burchardt, J., and Thompson, L. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), pp.150-63.

⁸⁵ Howkins, 'Death and Rebirth?', pp.23-4.

⁸⁶ Lord Ernle, p.418; Orwin, *English Farming*, p.91.

⁸⁷ Smith, M.J., *The Politics of Agricultural Support in Britain* (Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1996), p.1.

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that is rarely mentioned in the historiography that has been conditioned by its results; for instance, J.K. Stanford was reproducing the narrative of the despoliation of the interwar countryside by as early as 1956 in his official history of Friesian cattle in Britain, quoting Sir Alfred Munnings who wrote, in *The Second Burst*,

You may remember how the war was followed, as most wars are, by a boom in all things which gradually died away as the nineteen twenties drew towards the 'thirties. [...] Beyond, as a background, the simple English landscape, hedges, fields and hedgerow oaks not yet hacked down.⁸⁸

In the 1980s, Brown titled a chapter 'The Inter-War Depression' in his study of agriculture whilst Newby depicts agriculture as blighted from 1914 to 1939 in a tellingly christened chapter, 'Boom to Bust and Back Again'. Even Howkins casts a gloomy cloud over the years of 1921 to 1939 with his selection of the title 'The Locust Years' to describe the period as experienced in rural England.⁸⁹

The persistence of the acceptance of this dolorous story of farmers' interwar experience may have resulted from the social experiences of the Second World War. Farmers enjoyed significant popularity after the War as a result of the public perception of their contribution to maintaining the nation's food supplies during the conflict and a general feeling that they had suffered

⁸⁸ Stanford, J.K., *British Friesians: a History of the Breed* (London: Max Parrish, 1956), pp.87-8.

⁸⁹ Howkins, *Death of Rural England*; Whetham, *Agrarian History*, pp.43-112; Brown, *Agriculture*, pp.76-106; Newby, *Country Life*, pp.157-79.

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in the 1920s and 1930s;⁹⁰ they were rewarded with generous Government support.⁹¹ It was not until the 1970s that this perception began to be undermined as sociologists started to raise awkward questions about the nature of class relations in agriculture as they initiated a critical examination of the industry.⁹² The challenges that new groups of rural residents presented to farmers' power over local decision-making in the countryside were also highlighted.⁹³ Rural development had begun to be increasingly separated from farming and by the 1980s the countryside was recognised as having come under increased pressure from leisure and residential claims that competed for its use with farming,⁹⁴ a phenomenon recognised with some perspicacity in 1968 by Jones.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, the public popularity of farming lasted until the 1980s when interrelated issues of environmental degradation, animal welfare and the dangers of human contamination from animal diseases, such as bovine spongiform encephalopathy, brought farmers' methods into

⁹⁰ Griffiths, C., 'Heroes of the Reconstruction? Images of British Farmers in War and Peace', in *War, Agriculture and Food: Rural Europe from the 1930s to the 1950s*, ed. by Brassley, P., Segers, Y., and Van Molle, L. (London: Routledge, 2012), pp.209-28.

⁹¹ Burchardt, J., 'Introduction: Farming and the Countryside', in *The Contested Countryside: Rural Politics and Land Controversy in Modern Britain*, ed. by Burchardt, J., and Conford, P. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), pp.1-17.

⁹² Newby, H., Bell, C., Saunders, P., and Rose, D., 'Farming for Survival: The Small Farmer in the Contemporary Rural Class Structure', in *The Petite Bourgeoisie: Comparative Studies of the Uneasy Stratum*, ed. by Bechhofer, F., and Elliot, B. (London: Macmillan, 1981) pp.38-70; Newby et al., *Property*; Newby, H., *The Deferential Worker: a Study of Farm Workers in East Anglia* (London: Penguin, 1977); Carter, I., 'Agricultural Workers in the Class Structure: a Critical Note', *Sociological Review*, 22 2, (1974), 271-9; Bell, C., and Newby, H., 'Capitalist Farmers in the British Class Structure', *Sociologia Ruralis*, 14 1-2, (1974), 86-107; Newby, H., 'Deference and the Agricultural Worker', *Sociological Review*, 23 1, (1975), 51-60; Bell, C., and Newby, H., 'The Sources of Variation in Agricultural Workers' Images of Society', *Sociological Review*, 21 2, (1973), 229-53; Newby, H., 'Agricultural Workers in the Class Structure', *Sociological Review*, 20 3, (1972), 413-39.

⁹³ Bell and Newby, p.100.

⁹⁴ Marsden, T., Lowe, P., and Whatmore, S., 'Introduction: Questions of Rurality', in *Rural Restructuring: Global Processes and their Responses*, ed. by Marsden, T., Lowe, P., and Whatmore, S. (London: David Fulton, 1990), pp.1-20, (p.2).

⁹⁵ Jones, T.P., 'Rural Depopulation in an Area of South Devon since 1945' (unpublished M.A. thesis, London School of Economics, 1968), pp.110-131.

question.⁹⁶ Doubts began to be raised about the ethics of offering substantial State subsidies to the producers in an industry in which irresponsibility seemed increasingly apparent.⁹⁷ Whether coincidental with these developments or not, the accepted version of the interwar period as one of unalloyed economic depression in agriculture in which the origins of this policy were to be found have begun to be put under scrutiny.

Scrutiny of the veracity of this 'discourse of distress' in interwar agriculture might have begun earlier than the twenty-first century if the lead shown by Fletcher in 1961 in re-examining the 'Great Depression' in agriculture of the last quarter of the nineteenth century and finding that it had been somewhat exaggerated in geographical extent had been extended into the interwar years; Fletcher, apparently, abandoned such a course after brief reference in his 1954 M.Sc. thesis.⁹⁸ Another opportunity was missed in Edith Whetham's 1978 contribution to *The Agrarian History of England and Wales* which had the potential to act as a catalyst for a positive reappraisal of the performance of the industry. Indeed, scattered throughout Whetham's work are references to aspects of farming reflecting structural change in the industry and some benefits associated with it, such as that between 1924 and 1935 the volume of agricultural output at 1930-1 prices had increased by 25 percent as a result, generally, of greater production of products other than

⁹⁶ Cox, G., "'Listen to Us!'" Country Sports and the Mobilization of a Marginalised Constituency', in *The Contested Countryside: Rural Politics and Land Controversy in Modern Britain*, ed. by Burchardt, J., and Conford, P. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), pp.145-66, (p.149).

⁹⁷ Burchardt, 'Introduction: Farming and the Countryside', p.2; Martin, *Development*, p.1.

⁹⁸ Fletcher, T. W., 'The Economic Development of Agriculture in East Lancashire, 1870-1939' (unpublished M.Sc. thesis, University of Leeds, 1954), p.276; Fletcher, T.W., 'Lancashire Livestock Farming during the Great Depression', *Agricultural History Review*, 9 1, (1961), 17-42, (pp.17, 39).

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grazing animals and cereals, such as milk, pig meat, poultry and eggs, the producers of which benefited from the low cereal prices bemoaned by arable farmers.⁹⁹ However, Whetham reproduced the general feeling of gloom with regard to the period, despite showing increases in productivity per worker and the more intensive production that had led to an increase in agricultural output of 2 to 3 percent between 1924 and 1939, giving more prominence to the decrease in the numbers of agricultural workers and the reductions in cereal and crop acreages and concluding that the depression of the 1930s worked against the agricultural interest.¹⁰⁰

Whetham's overall pessimism perhaps reflects the concluding paragraphs of her 1974 article, 'The Agriculture Act and its Repeal – the "Great Betrayal"', which, rather than drawing attention to the advantages gained by agriculture during the 1930s and since the War, focused attention on a verification of the existence of distress in interwar agriculture. Reference was made in this article to her 1970s interviews with farmers in which persistent mention had been made of the damage caused by the so-called 'Great Betrayal' of farmers in 1921 by the Lloyd George led coalition Government.¹⁰¹ This 'betrayal' involved the rapid withdrawal of price support for cereal growing in 1920 as portions of that year's Agriculture Act were repealed. The support had continued until 1921 and resulted from the 1917 Corn Production Act but was removed despite an assurance in the 1920 Agriculture Act that

⁹⁹ Whetham, *Agrarian History*, pp.211, 265.

¹⁰⁰ Whetham, *Agrarian History*, pp.314-5.

¹⁰¹ Whetham, E., 'The Agriculture Act and its Repeal – the "Great Betrayal"', *Agricultural History Review*, 22 1, (1974), 36-49.

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any such withdrawal would only take place with four years' notice. The result was that, after the event, a narrative developed throughout the interwar years that pinpointed this withdrawal, or 'betrayal', as one of the chief causes of farmers' difficulties, despite its being welcomed by farmers at the time.¹⁰² Whetham institutionalised this narrative of 'betrayal' in 1974 and reinforced it by making references in her 1978 work to the financial disorder that would have been surrounding agriculture as market forces were reintroduced to the industry as a consequence of the 'betrayal',¹⁰³ despite cereal farmers being compensated substantially in 1921 for the withdrawal of price support.¹⁰⁴ This version of events, as produced and reproduced by farmers and members of the ruralist and agricultural community, with which Edith Whetham, as daughter of the landowner and agricultural economist Sir William Cecil Dampier-Whetham and with access to farmers to interview, was undoubtedly connected and sympathetic, went unchallenged until 1986.¹⁰⁵

Edith Whetham's work implies that support for agriculture from the 1930s onwards was the result of recognition by Government of its own responsibility for the betrayal and the associated depression from which the industry had represented itself as suffering during the interwar period. The suggestion that such recognition by Government of its own responsibility existed is confirmed by 1923 MAF documents. These make reference to the House of Commons debate in 1920 over the continuation of the Corn

¹⁰² Ibid., pp.36-49.

¹⁰³ Whetham, *Agrarian History*, pp.141, 172.

¹⁰⁴ Whetham, "'Great Betrayal'", p.48.

¹⁰⁵ Cooper, A. F., 'Another Look at the "Great Betrayal": Agrarian Reformers and Agricultural Policy in Britain', *Agricultural History*, 60 3, (1986), 81-104.

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Production Act and the adverse effects of the repeal of the relevant elements of the Agriculture Act. In this debate, the documents note, 'Farmers were assured that "whatever befalls, agriculture will never be neglected by any Government"'.¹⁰⁶ This is reinforced in the same documents by reference to a speech made by Lloyd George at Caxton Hall from 1919 in which he assured the agricultural industry of price support for the 'staple products' of farmers to 'safeguard them against serious loss'.¹⁰⁶ This was a speech referred to in the *NFU Record* during the period in which farmers claimed, soon after, that they had suffered unduly,¹⁰⁷ the claims repeated by Whetham's interviewees in the 1970s. This concentration by Whetham on the contribution by Government to the pressure on its relations with agriculture seems to have diverted attention within academic circles away from questioning the generally accepted image of adverse fortunes in the industry during the period of the creation of the 'discourse of distress' of the interwar years which had helped substantially in constructing this image. This occurred in spite of Whetham's own acknowledgement of the more nuanced picture of farming's relative interwar success and failure from her 1978 work that is outlined briefly above.

It seems pertinent that Whetham's work on the role of Government in the genesis of agricultural difficulties was published at a time when farming was beginning to attract attention for its high level of subsidy and for other issues relating to its undertaking within the European Economic Community.¹⁰⁸ In turn, the diversion into the politics of the 'Great Betrayal' had the effect of

¹⁰⁶ NA/MAF/53/64.

¹⁰⁷ *NFU Record*, February 1921.

¹⁰⁸ Grigg, *English Agriculture*, p.1.

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delaying the reappraisal of the economic performance of the agriculture of the interwar years that Whetham's 1978 work, taken alone, might have prompted, given that Whetham had failed to exhibit the significant economic data on interwar British agriculture that would have verified the existence of severe difficulties in agriculture and justified the laments of the farming community.

F.M.L. Thompson provided another missed prompt for a reappraisal of interwar agriculture in 1991, having perhaps missed in his own work on landownership in 1969 the one provided by Fletcher in 1961, referred to above. Thompson's 1969 work, as with that of Sturmeý in 1955, identified problems created for themselves in the interwar years by farmers who had been willing or, in some cases, apparently compelled to purchase their farms in the years between 1918 and 1927 as landowners divested themselves propitiously of farms and estates in a land market that would prove to have been substantially inflated.¹⁰⁹ Neither Sturmeý nor Thompson examined in detail the wider interwar economic situation and both left the impression that land sales had been merely another factor contributing to depression. Thompson returned to the theme of land sales between 1990 and 1993 in a series of articles in which the impression was once again given of an agriculture afflicted by depression, but the work suffered from a concentration on the subject of continued aristocratic and gentry landownership after the First World War rather than on the fortunes of farmers in general and of small

¹⁰⁹ Thompson, F.M.L., *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century*, pp.327-49; Sturmeý, 'Owner-Farming 1900 to 1950', pp.283-306.

farmers in particular.¹¹⁰ The theme of land sales is one revisited by Thompson in 2007 in a debate with Beckett and Turner over the extent of sales in the period of 1918 to 1922. This debate, itself, can be seen as stimulating the re-evaluation of interwar agriculture insofar as Beckett and Turner have questioned the historical existence of the extent of land sales at very high prices whilst Thompson's reply maintains that they did, indeed, take place.¹¹¹ Since owner-occupation has been claimed to have been a major cause of interwar financial problems for farmers, the proof of fewer purchases would imply that such a cause may have been exaggerated along with the generally depressed state of agriculture.

Thompson, however, in another 1991 work referred to the nostalgia and long memories of farmers before the Second World War which conferred upon the third quarter of the nineteenth century the status of a "golden age" which seemed never to have been matched, thus creating the illusion of hardship in interwar levels of profit and standards of living.¹¹² Thompson pointed out that, even between the Wars, agricultural prices fell at only the same rate as 'the general price level'. He also observed that the impression of agricultural decline may have been strengthened by its shrinking contribution

¹¹⁰ Thompson, F.M.L., 'English Landed Society in the Twentieth Century IV: Prestige without Power?', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6 3, (1993), 1-22; Thompson, 'English Landed Society III', 1-24; Thompson, F.M.L., 'English Landed Society in the Twentieth Century II: New Poor and New Rich', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6 1, (1991), 1-20; Thompson, F.M.L., 'English Landed Society in the Twentieth Century I: Property, Collapse and Survival', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5 40, (1990), 1-24.

¹¹¹ Beckett J., and Turner, M., 'End of the Old Order? F.M.L. Thompson, the Land Question and the Burden of Ownership in England, c.1880-1925', *Agricultural History Review*, 55 2, (2007), 289-300; Thompson, F.M.L., 'The Land Market, 1880-1925: a Reappraisal Reappraised', *Agricultural History Review*, 55 2, (2007), 289-300.

¹¹² Thompson, F.M.L., 'Anatomy', pp.213-8.

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to the total national output which, despite being a general feature of mature industrial economies, may have led to the conclusion amongst farmers that they were suffering, thereby creating an unconstructive mental attitude; the contribution of Self and Storing in noting the 'depression psychology' with which legislation regarding agriculture was formulated in the 1930s helps to confirm Thompson's observation, further strengthened by another he made that, although farmers' incomes were low in 1931, they fluctuated over the interwar period, such fluctuations in themselves perhaps deepening uncertainty and pessimism.¹¹³ Thompson's assertion of an overly self-pitying attitude amongst farmers is confirmed, somewhat, by the 1929 comments of A.W. Ashby, the agricultural economist. Ashby maintained that, with regard to farmers' mental states and the 'depression', 'Both the individuals and the group tend to develop long memories, and to remember their disappointments more vividly than their successes.'¹¹⁴ Furthermore, Thompson implied that the historiography of farming might be affected by a flawed methodology insofar as the income levels of farmers which had been relied upon to judge living conditions were rather crude, consistently failing to assess direct consumption of produce on the farm by the farm family, the inclusion of the value of which would increase the measure of the standards of living of farmers and negate some measures of impoverishment interpreted by historians as contributing to depression.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Self and Storing, p.19.

¹¹⁴ Ashby, 'Some Human and Social Factors', p.96-7.

¹¹⁵ Thompson, F.M.L., 'Anatomy', pp.213-8.

Perren provided the ammunition in 1994 for another potential assault on the stronghold of historicised interwar depression. Perren noted that the output of agriculture expanded by over 15 percent between 1930-1 and 1936-7, mainly as a result of Government tariffs, subsidies and marketing assistance. However, he still concluded gloomily that the revisionism regarding growth that was estimated to have taken place in the economy as a whole across the interwar period, despite extreme periodic downturns, had not extended to agriculture and that the existence of a severe agricultural depression between 1924 and 1940 in the industry could not be contradicted.¹¹⁶

Agriculture and Economy in Interwar Rural England: Regeneration

Recent work on the fortunes of agriculture in interwar England has given a more positive outlook that corresponds somewhat with the recent vibrancy assigned to the cultural developments of the countryside between the Wars.¹¹⁷ Progress has been made on a revision of the performance of interwar agriculture. Those historians, such as Howkins, Brassley, Collins, and Martin who, working individually, have made a re-evaluation of the economic performance of the agricultural industry at the time have seen in it the same

¹¹⁶ Perren, pp.52-61, 68.

¹¹⁷ Brassley, P., Burchardt, J., and Thompson, L., 'Introduction', in *The English Countryside Between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?*, ed. by Brassley, P., Burchardt, J., and Thompson, L. (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), pp.1-9, (pp.5-9); Brassley, Burchardt, Thompson, 'Conclusion', pp.235, 245-9.

limited success identified by Whetham but not previously fully capitalised upon.¹¹⁸

It is difficult, initially, to understand Perren's gloomy outlook in the light of either this subsequent work or, even, some of earlier vintage. Grigg, in 1989, preceded Perren in seeing upward movements in interwar agricultural output in England and Wales, estimating that it increased by 1.6 percent per annum from 1922/4 to 1936/9, this being the fastest rate of growth since the peak growth of 1.8 percent per annum achieved during the period of 1821 to 1861. These figures seem to have received little attention which may be due to the fact that they appeared merely as a feature in a general study of the long-term history of English agriculture.¹¹⁹ Grigg's suggestion that growth took place encompasses the period of 1931 to 1936 in which Perren estimated there to have been significant growth but tends to contradict Perren's downbeat assessment of the period of 1924 to 1940 in estimating increases in output to have taken place.

Brassley, however, has demonstrated that agricultural output in the years 1920 to 1922 was at its lowest since 1867 to 1869 so initial growth increases after 1920 to 1922 would effectively be making up ground lost earlier, but his figures certainly correspond with those of Perren in showing an increased volume of output in the 1930s and with Grigg in showing increased

¹¹⁸ Brassley, 'British Farming between the Wars', p.193; Howkins, 'Death and Rebirth?', p.12; Collins, (unpublished paper); Martin, *Development*, p.31.

¹¹⁹ Grigg, *English Agriculture*, p.7.

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output volume from the mid-1920s.¹²⁰ These assessments also correspond with the assertion by Howkins that agricultural depression is evident in the interwar years but that it was concentrated principally in the years from 1922 to 1925 and 1929 to 1932 leaving the majority of the years in the interwar period free of serious problems for growth to have taken place.¹²¹ Howkins' assessment makes it apparent that both Grigg and Perren have included some years of depression in the periods of growth that they suggest existed. This can be interpreted as showing even more significant upswings in farmers' fortunes in the growth that followed the years of depression. Collins and Brassley both describe increases in both agricultural productivity and output that occurred between the wars despite low prices for agricultural commodities and increased international competition.¹²² Calculations from Brassley's figures indicate that, overall, by including the average output of the years 1920 to 1922 and 1935 to 1939, there was a rise of 27 percent in output from 1920 to 1939¹²³ which, taken at face value, can hardly be said to be demonstrative of the depression in agriculture which has contributed so heavily in creating the impression of a blighted interwar countryside.¹²⁴ Evidence to support the notion of a contemporary and subsequent over emphasis on agricultural decline can be seen to some degree in the kind of economic data from the interwar years themselves that economic historians use; for example, total agricultural output increased during the 1930s and was 20 percent higher for

¹²⁰ Brassley, P., 'Output and Technical Change in Twentieth Century British Agriculture', *Agricultural History Review*, 48 1, (2000), 60-84, (p.62).

¹²¹ Howkins, 'Death and Rebirth?', p.13; Brassley, (unpublished paper); Collins, (unpublished paper).

¹²² Brassley, Burchardt, Thompson, 'Conclusion', pp.245-6.

¹²³ Brassley, 'British Farming', p.193.

¹²⁴ Brassley, Burchardt, Thompson, 'Conclusion', p.245.

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the year 1934 to 1935 at 235.5 million pounds, valued at 1930 to 1931 prices, than the 195.5 million pounds for 1930 to 1931.¹²⁵ The trend indicated by these figures corresponds generally with those suggested to have existed by Grigg and Perren as well as by those seeking to establish a positive view of agriculture in the interwar English countryside.

Another indicator of fortunes in farmers' incomes exists and these do not appear to have been severely compromised by depression in the interwar years. The agricultural economist D.A.E. Harkness spoke to a paper given to the Agricultural Economics Society in 1934 and stated that claims about drastic falls in farmers' incomes in the years from 1924 to 1931 had been exaggerated as had the amounts that farmers had paid out in wages, concluding that farmer returns on capital were still significant and stating that, on tenants' capital estimated at £440 million in mainland Britain, 'After paying a labourer's wage to the farmer it would have been possible to have paid 11.4 percent in the best year and 7.8 percent in the worst year on this amount of capital.' W.H. Senior supported Harkness' paper in its assertions whilst A.G. Ruston voiced doubts over the findings but, if verifiable, and Harkness went into his methodology in some detail, they are hardly supportive of the notion of the existence of hardship amongst farmers as an entire group of individuals.¹²⁶

Harkness' contemporary account has some echoes in the assessment of farmers' fortunes by Brassley, Burchardt and Thompson who have looked at

¹²⁵ Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Agricultural Statistics: Report on the Acreage under Crops and the Number of Live Stock in England and Wales, 1935, Volume 70* (London: HMSO, 1935), p.53.

¹²⁶ Harkness, D.A.E., 'The Distribution of the Agricultural Income', *Journal of the Proceedings of the Agricultural Economics Society*, 3 1, (1934), 25-39, (pp.34, 37-9).

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the income levels rather than simply at the economic output for agriculture, reflecting Cooper's statement with regard to 'practical farmers' being 'concerned only with their material condition.'¹²⁷ Levels of net farm income fail to demonstrate that distress was suffered by farmers across the whole of the interwar period having been above those seen before the First World War from 1918 to 1923, and considerably higher in the years 1920 to 1923, achieving higher than pre-War levels again from 1935 to 1939. Whilst Bellerby had confirmed as early as 1969 that rising income levels could be seen for farmers from 1933 to 1938,¹²⁸ the calculations made by Harkness suggest that these later authors might even be able to reassess farmers' incomes in the years between 1924 and 1929 and conclude that distress was more imaginary than real and created by various factors, including those referred to above by Ashby and Thompson, such as the farmers' long memories of the "golden age" of farming before the 1870s and, by Thompson, of the 'money illusion' created by rising and falling incomes at times of inflation and deflation.¹²⁹

Brassley has, however, sounded a note of caution in his assessment of agriculture at the time. Data on farm incomes indicates that there was some justification for the existence of the picture of a distressed interwar agriculture. Brassley highlights a pattern of fluctuating farm incomes: following post First World War prosperity that lasted until around 1923, the net farm income fell. The index of UK net farm income fell below the 1904 to

¹²⁷ Cooper, *Conservative Politics*, p.67.

¹²⁸ Bellerby, J.R., 'Distribution of Farm Income in the United Kingdom, 1867-1938', in *Essays in Agrarian History, Volume 2*, ed. by Minchington, W.E. (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1968), pp.261-79, (p.137).

¹²⁹ Thompson, F.M.L., 'Anatomy' pp.213-8; Ashby, 'Some Human and Social Factors', pp.96-7.

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1910 level (100) in 1923 and did not rise above it again until the period from 1935 to 1939 when it reached 139.8 having reached a low of 77.4 in the period from 1924 to 1929.¹³⁰ The years over the interwar period in which the net farm income was above the 1904 to 1910 index level of 100 were outnumbered by those in which it was below.¹³¹ Harkness' figures on incomes might suggest that Brassley is being over-cautious, especially in estimating how far farmers' incomes fell in the 1920s, but it has been noted that there was an objection to Harkness' figures from A.G. Ruston who suggested Harkness had overestimated the portion of the annual net income that was available to farmers.¹³² In counterpoint to Senior and Brassley, the notion that distress was being exaggerated in the 1920s is certainly given credibility by a report from the Ministry of Agriculture; commissioned in 1927 as a result of 'what has been said in the press and elsewhere' about the existence of agricultural depression at the time, it indicated that there was 'little sign of any depression' to be found despite some pessimism within the agricultural community.¹³³

There is, it appears, some justification for the assertion that agriculture prospered overall in the interwar period, but this is a judgement made within the realm of orthodox economic theory, a point made by Brassley, Burchardt and Thompson who state that 'surely the most important gauge of economic

¹³⁰ Brassley, 'British Farming', p.198.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Harkness, p.38.

¹³³ NA/MAF/48/75, *Extent of the Present Agricultural Depression, Reports and Memorandum, 1927*.

success' in assessing British agriculture is its output.¹³⁴ However, it can be seen that increases in output can be countermanded by falling prices for that output so that increases are not reflected in rising incomes. Prices for agricultural produce certainly saw considerable falls in the interwar years. Index numbers based on 1911 to 1913 prices as representing 100 show falls from a high of 292 in 1920 to a low of 107 in 1933 rising to 113 in 1934 whilst, at the same time, the cost of living index, which had been lower than the agricultural produce index between 1916 and 1920, being at 249 in the latter year and, thus, demonstrating earlier rises in farm incomes, fell more slowly from 1920 and stood at 141 in 1934.¹³⁵ This would vindicate Brassley's figures on falling farm incomes from 1923 to 1935 but there is a caveat to be drawn which supports the assertion made above by Thompson that farm incomes may be higher than such indices suggest because of the food that can be produced and consumed on the farm which incurs little expenditure and, effectively, raises the value considerably of the money income of farms.¹³⁶ The cost of living index mentioned above shows that food accounted for 60 percent of total expected working class household expenditure.¹³⁷ The advantage of not paying for all or much food consumed on the farm thus appears to be substantial. Consequently, whilst apparent farm incomes may well have been falling as a result of prices for agricultural produce falling faster than the index of the cost of living, they were falling effectively from a higher

¹³⁴ Brassley, Burchardt, Thompson, 'Conclusion', pp.245-6.

¹³⁵ Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge, *Report of the Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge in England and Wales, 1934-1936*, (Cmd. 5095), (London: Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge, 1936), pp.41-2.

¹³⁶ Thompson, F.M.L., 'Anatomy', pp.213-8.

¹³⁷ Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge, *Report*, pp.41-2.

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starting point to a higher finishing point than might be assumed if the expenditure for the majority of the food component of the index were to be extracted. Furthermore, another of the elements used in calculating the cost of living index was local taxes paid in the form of rates. These were reduced and then eliminated on agricultural land by legislation in the 1920s,¹³⁸ removing another financial burden on farmers and reducing their comparative cost of living. Therefore, the cost of living index can be seen to be increasingly irrelevant in estimating farmers' incomes since two major elements contributing towards it were largely inapplicable to farmers, and farmers' incomes have to be assumed to have been higher than initial indicators might suggest.

The intuitive assumption must not be made that the increases in agricultural output noted by Perren, Grigg and Brassley equate automatically to increases in incomes for farmers since it is reasonable to assume that these authors are referring to gross output, whereas net output was considerably lower. Astor and Rowntree showed that increases had taken place since the 1870s and especially in the 1930s in the amount of inputs into farming, such as imported feeding stuffs which rose from 6.8 million tons to 8.1 million tons between 1931 and 1937, for which farmers had to pay, effectively reducing the return to farmers from growing output.¹³⁹ However, this could be argued to have represented good business practice since, as Harkness pointed out, the prices of imported feeding stuffs had been falling faster from 1927 to 1931

¹³⁸ Lord Ernle, p.418.

¹³⁹ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, 2nd edn., p.96.

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than the prices paid for agricultural produce and these lower input costs relative to returns on produce would help to maintain the real purchasing power of farmers' operating capital.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, the increased use of feeding stuffs reduced the amount of labour it was necessary for farmers to pay, increasing their share of the returns on produce, this coming on top of the improved share of the income they received because of the increasing productivity of labour to which John Orr referred in 1931 but which many farmers and landlords had been keen to deny.¹⁴¹

Much of what has been said so far in this chapter has been suggestive of the ability of the agricultural community in the interwar years to deal more effectively with the structural changes forced upon the industry than had been acknowledged by historians before the twenty-first century and to avoid the worst of the scourge of depression by which it claimed to be afflicted. Change and adaptability had not gone unnoticed during the 1930s, Astor and Rowntree noting in 1938 the existence of increases in productivity due to mechanization and specialization that increased overseas production had forced upon agriculture: 'All this represents a change in response to the shifting levels of prices [and] an increased use of raw materials'. The beginnings of economic modernization in the 1930s suggest that the alternative case for the interwar countryside as one of vigour and regeneration

¹⁴⁰ Harkness, p.29.

¹⁴¹ Orr, J., 'The Economic Basis of the Minimum Wage in Agriculture', *Journal of the Proceedings of the Agricultural Economics Society*, 1 4, (1931), 3-18, (pp.6, 9-10).

proposed by Brassley, Burchardt and Thompson undoubtedly has some scope for further investigation.¹⁴²

Astor and Rowntree go on to say, however, that change and modernization in agriculture involved 'a decreased use of British land and British labour'.¹⁴³ The two main economic measures that have been used in recent work to demonstrate the relative success of agriculture in the interwar years when compared with the previously existing historiographical perspective can be seen to be gross output and net incomes. There are problems associated with these measures which go some way to undermining the revisionist picture of agriculture. Increasing economic output in any sector, such as agriculture, is not necessarily synonymous with rising incomes for all those operating within it or with increasing employment by businesses or with increasing numbers of employers which, in this case, means farmers; less labour is needed if less land is used and this may have extended to a requirement for fewer farmers. Decreases in numbers of farmworkers are well known to have taken place but structural changes in employment patterns may also have extended to farmers and this possibility needs to be examined. It was not until the late 1930s, when Government support for agriculture was starting to take effect, demonstrated by increases in wheat acreages and numbers of cattle,¹⁴⁴ that any real sign of recovery could be seen in British agriculture. This recovery may have started at a time when some inefficient

¹⁴² Brassley, Burchardt, Thompson, 'Conclusion', pp.235-49.

¹⁴³ Viscount Astor, and Seebohm Rowntree, B., *British Agriculture: the Principles of Future Policy* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1938), pp.53-4.

¹⁴⁴ Martin, *Development*, p.31.

and marginal farmers had been eliminated if patterns in the agricultural labour market are replicated by those of employers and businesses.

Self and Storing estimated that four-fifths of subsidy paid to agriculture in the interwar years was paid to the producers of wheat.¹⁴⁵ The concentration on arable subsidies would do little to remedy falling incomes for most farmers, especially small-scale ones for whom wheat growing was insignificant according to evidence given by the agricultural economist and farmer R. McG. Carslaw¹⁴⁶ to the Royal Commission investigating tithe rentcharge.¹⁴⁷ Therefore, what income was left after disregarding the subsidies must have either been shared out amongst all farmers meaning that the majority of incomes fell, creating a mood of depression, or some farmers may have failed, which could have created the same perception of overall depression; most likely it was a combination of the two things. It remains to be seen whether falls in income were shared equally by all farmers or ameliorated by falls in farmer numbers for those who survived. Variations in the numbers of farmers over the interwar period will be examined in detail in the next chapter.

¹⁴⁵ Self and Storing, p.19.

¹⁴⁶ Whetham, *Agricultural Economists*, p.52.

¹⁴⁷ Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge, *Minutes of Evidence*, p.610.

Conclusion

A picture has emerged of a historiography that highlights decline in interwar English agriculture alongside re-evaluated evidence that points to less severe problems when measured by output and by incomes relative to cost of living. The recent study of economic performance that supports a view of a less depressed agriculture than had appeared to exist would, if accepted uncritically, indicate that sedimentation of error has occurred in the historiography of farming between the two Wars. The pertinent point to understand is that the historiography reflects the rural 'discourse of distress' which emerged in the interwar period itself. This discourse was one in which the countryside as a whole was seen to be in decline so that a picture of a blanket depression covering the whole of agriculture was not difficult to establish. Where contemporary commentary made any distinction it was between relative levels of distress at a vague geographical level, merely suggesting that in an agriculture suffering universally, farming in the eastern arable districts was more severely depressed than elsewhere. This would indicate, if verifiable, that large arable producers were the main victims of agricultural depression. It would be wrong to state that small farmers were overlooked altogether because a vigorous debate took place during the interwar years over the merits of smallholdings; further chapters in this work will examine the fortunes of smallholders as a measure of the economic problems of small-scale farmers, since it is as a result of this debate with the concerns of these producers that significant and relevant evidence exists on the conditions in small-scale farming. However, the mainstream argument for

the existence of agricultural woe tended to elide distinctions in scale of production and simply to express the judgement that all agriculture was suffering.

The recent examination of the economic output of agriculture as a measure of success has highlighted gains relative to the historically established image of interwar decline. However, this examination has its limitations since, as with all such scrutiny, it does not reveal the levels at which production was taking place by different operators and whether returns to production were evenly spread amongst producers or whether there was structural change as producers of larger or smaller scales prospered at the expense of others. It does not even indicate whether failure amongst many was masked by success by a few and this is not remedied by the recounting of the fortunes of one or two individuals, such as has occurred over the years.¹⁴⁸ In social terms, this is not tenable because the social effects of economic developments are not measured. The revisionist arguments for the presence of growth in agriculture and dynamism in rural society and culture have been conspicuous in their overlooking of the numbers of farmers who operated the businesses of the interwar countryside with the exception of a brief account by Brassley of increasing numbers of farmers in Devon.¹⁴⁹ Brassley's understanding of the importance of the use of the numbers of the personnel involved in farming as an indicator of economic fortunes in the industry is recognised in the subject

¹⁴⁸ Brigden, pp.200-11; Martin, J., 'The Structural Transformation of British Agriculture: the Resurgence of Progressive High-Input Arable Farming', in *The Front Line of Freedom: British Farming in the Second World War*, ed. by Short, B., Watkins, C., and Martin, J. (Exeter: British Agricultural History Society, 2006), pp.16-35, (p.28); Brown, *Agriculture*, pp.80-1.

¹⁴⁹ Brassley, 'Wheelwright', p.229.

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of the next chapter of this work. The chapter is written on the premise that changes in the numbers of farmers operating in English agriculture are a useful measure of success and failure in the industry. It will initially examine changes in farmer numbers as a measure of prosperity or decline since it is of great relevance to chart the level of the continuing involvement of farmers in agriculture or to discern any signs of their disappearance. It will continue by starting to examine the structure of farm businesses by size to assess the circumstances of farmers of varying scales, thereby creating an indicator of the economic fortunes of small-scale farmers in interwar England. Walton observes, 'Social history is ultimately about the experiences, relationships and values of all sorts and conditions of people';¹⁵⁰ it would be unforgivable to judge any economic activity involving people without including the fortunes of those people. A measure of failure or success can be found in increases or decreases in numbers of farmers and in the sizes of their operations relative to their overall numbers.

¹⁵⁰ Walton, J., *Lancashire: a Social History 1558-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p.4.

Chapter 2: Numerical Decline of Farmers in Interwar England

Introduction

The existence of economic distress amongst the farming population between the two world wars had been regarded as almost incontrovertible by historians between the Second World War and the early twenty-first century. It formed part of an emotionally charged pro-farming historiography in which the more positive performance indicators of interwar agriculture were, indeed, acknowledged¹ but, as shown in Chapter One, generally, elided. The historiography reflected a picture of relentless decline in interwar English agriculture that had been painted by agricultural interests during the 1920s and 1930s, as outlined in Chapter One, above, where a challenge to that depiction that has emerged in recent historical study has also been detailed.² The challenge is premised on those figures for the economic output of the industry that were available formerly but had been largely ignored. These figures suggest that farmers as a group did not suffer economic hardship to the extent that had generally been accepted.

The historiography of interwar English rural society as a whole had formerly been dominated by versions of a decline which had accompanied the agricultural hardship of the two decades between the Wars and, thus, formed part of the 'discourse of distress' of rural England; indeed, the economic travails

¹ Whetham, *Agrarian History*; Whetham, "'Great Betrayal'", 36-49.

² Brassley, 'British Farming', p.193; Collins, (unpublished paper).

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of agriculture appeared as synonymous with rural social malaise.³ The recent economic challenge to the formerly established reality of the travails of interwar agriculture, mentioned above, has parallels in revisionist considerations of aspects of interwar rural society⁴ that stress the existence of vitality between the Wars. The result is that two divergent versions of the conditions in the economy and society of the interwar English countryside have been constructed in the relatively short time since the period under examination: the earlier one stresses decline whilst the more recent one depicts a more healthy and vibrant rural economy and society. The causes of this disparity require investigation. Such an investigation is particularly relevant for this thesis, given its focus on farmers and their business operations, because farmers and their supporters were influential in creating the 'discourse of distress', as outlined in Chapter One.⁵

Judgements upon the social condition of interwar rural England appear to be made upon normative associations wherein estimations of the quality of life in the countryside at any time coincide with the contemporary economic conditions in agriculture⁶ or, more importantly, upon the representation of success or failure that is given to those conditions. The historiography suggests that this is true whether these judgements are based upon indicators of economic performance that are stressed by revisionist modern historians or upon the stated evidence of those running agricultural businesses and those with interests

³ Newby, *Country Life*, pp.157-80.

⁴ Howkins, 'Death and Rebirth?', pp.10-25; Brassley, Burchardt, Thompson, 'Conclusion', pp.235-49; Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, pp.95-112.

⁵ Chapter 1, above.

⁶ Miller, S., 'Land Use and Leisure: Leslie Scott and the Contested Countryside', in *The Contested Countryside: Rural Politics and Land Controversy in Modern Britain*, ed. by Burchardt, J., and Conford, P. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), pp.19-38; Sheail, pp.150-63.

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in maintaining an agricultural countryside, as has been shown to have been the case during the interwar years⁷ and in the post-World War Two twentieth century.⁸ The contrast to this is the contention that versions of interwar success and of failure may both be tenable and brought into resolution with one another by proceeding from the position adopted by Howkins in 2003, albeit somewhat modified, wherein some groups prospered, overall, whilst others declined.⁹ There is no reason to suggest that such differentials of prosperity between certain social groups as were identified by Howkins cannot be extended to groups within farming given that it is an industry that varies widely in types and scales of production. Agriculture could contain certain groups of business operators who might well have enjoyed more success than others. Good reasons exist and are outlined in this chapter for suggesting that the success or failure of farmers can be measured by examining statistics that reveal trends in the numbers of farmers within identifiably different groups operating over the course of the period in question. Identification of such groups contradicts the norm whereby farmers have developed the identity of a single social and economic group and are consequently treated as such.¹⁰ Some reference has been made by historians to increased success in agriculture in the interwar years

⁷ Chapter 1, above; Burchardt, *Paradise*, pp.143-9.

⁸ Cox, pp.147-8; Howkins, A., 2008, "The Land of Lost Content": Ruralism, Englishness and Historical Change in the Countryside, 1890-1990', in *The Contested Countryside: Rural Politics and Land Controversy in Modern Britain*, ed. by Burchardt, J., and Conford, P. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), pp.187-202; Marsh, J., 'Agriculture's Role within the U.K.', in *The Contested Countryside: Rural Politics and Land Controversy in Modern Britain*, ed. by Burchardt, J., and Conford, P. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), pp.61-80, (pp.69-70); Matless, D., *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998); Wiener, M. J., *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987).

⁹ Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, pp.1-4.

¹⁰ Burchardt, 'Introduction: Farming and the Countryside', p.8.

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being attributable to farming type, particularly dairy farming,¹¹ but scant attention has been paid to numbers of farm businesses or their operators; such numbers will be examined in this thesis but with regard primarily, but not exclusively, to the proportions of business operators occupying contrasting sizes of farm with some subsequent attention being paid to the effects of economic conditions on farms of varying size in different branches of agriculture. Firstly, however, the very feasibility of measuring the numbers of those farmers who survived or failed must be assessed; this is the task of this chapter.

An exposition follows of the shortcomings of the approaches taken in the historiography to date, the main one being the absence of a thorough analysis of changes in farming over the interwar years as represented by any fluctuations in both the numbers of farmers operating businesses and the numbers of farms in existence. An appropriately redemptive analysis of these changes is then undertaken which outlines the numerous difficulties that may have led to the absence of any similar such examination in the previous work on the interwar period. A systematic attempt is made to reduce such difficulties by looking at data on numbers of farmers contained in various sources, including the *Census* from 1911, 1921 and 1931 and the *National Farm Survey* of 1941.¹² The results of this analysis are brought to bear on data on the numbers of farms found in

¹¹ Martin, *Development*, pp.11-13.

¹² HMSO, *Census of England and Wales, 1911, Volume 10 Part I: Occupations and Industries* (London: HMSO, 1915), Table 3 (p.16); HMSO, *Census of England and Wales, 1921, Occupations* (London: HMSO, 1925), Table 2 (pp.13-16); HMSO, *Census of England and Wales, 1931, Occupation Tables* (London: HMSO, 1935), Table 1 (p.1); Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *National Farm Survey of England and Wales: a Summary Report* (London: HMSO, 1946).

the annually published *Agricultural Statistics*.¹³ The analysis of statistical data from the period will show that there took place a surprisingly large fall in the numbers of farmers in England over the course of the interwar period. Such results might tend to support the argument that farmers did suffer somewhat over the years between 1918 and 1939. This will set the parameters for the remainder of the study which will explore whether particular groups of farmers, differentiated, firstly, by farm size as well as by farming type, were affected more than others by changes in the interwar countryside. This will lead to the exploration of the issue of why there seems to have been little exploration of the varying experiences of such groups within either the accepted narrative of a general decline of agriculture and of farmers or of the revised story of a seemingly successful interwar farming.

¹³ Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Agricultural Statistics: Report on the Acreage under Crops and the Number of Live Stock in England and Wales, 1919, Volume 54* (London: HMSO, 1919), Tables 1-12, pp.17-41; Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Agricultural Statistics: Report on the Acreage under Crops and the Number of Live Stock in England and Wales, 1920, Volume 55* (London: HMSO, 1920), Tables 1-14, pp.21-54; Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Agricultural Statistics: Report on the Acreage under Crops and the Number of Live Stock in England and Wales, 1921, Volume 56* (London: HMSO, 1921), Tables 1-10 pp.17-44; Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Agricultural Statistics: Report on the Acreage under Crops and the Number of Live Stock in England and Wales, 1922, Volume 57* (London: HMSO, 1922), Tables 1-8, pp.21-44; Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Agricultural Statistics: Report on the Acreage under Crops and the Number of Live Stock in England and Wales, 1923, Volume 58* (London: HMSO, 1923), Tables 1-5, pp.21-43; Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Agricultural Statistics: Report on the Acreage under Crops and the Number of Live Stock in England and Wales, 1927, Volume 62* (London: HMSO, 1927), Tables 1-8, pp.35-59; Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Agricultural Statistics: Report on the Acreage under Crops and the Number of Live Stock in England and Wales, 1929, Volume 64* (London: HMSO, 1929), Tables 1-8 pp.49-72; Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Agricultural Statistics: Report on the Acreage under Crops and the Number of Live Stock in England and Wales, 1931, Volume 66* (London: HMSO, 1931), Tables 1-8, pp.41-65; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1935, Volume 70*, Tables 1-12, pp.15-87; Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Agricultural Statistics: Report on the Acreage under Crops and the Number of Live Stock in England and Wales, 1938, Volume 73* (London: HMSO, 1938), Tables 1-11, pp.15-43; Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Agricultural Statistics: Report on the Acreage under Crops and the Number of Live Stock in England and Wales, 1939, Volume 74* (London: HMSO, 1939), Tables 1-11, pp.8-39.

Limitations of Non-Political Economy in the Study of Interwar England

The core of the contemporary British countryside is farming; farming, not agriculture, because agriculture implies merely the production of food from the land, whereas farming rightly shifts the emphasis to the people who produce the food.¹⁴

The work of post-Second World War historians on the interwar countryside has been addressed here in the light of a revised understanding of the conditions of agriculture at the time. The result has been to suggest that significant support exists for the developing body of academic opinion that decline and deterioration were not universally experienced across rural England and in its farming during the interwar period; this was, it must be said, an opinion held by Fletcher as early as 1954.¹⁵ It is also clear that the argument presented here has so far depended largely upon the narrow sort of 'productionist' approach which Jeremy Burchardt has criticised for its dominance hitherto of the study of the countryside.¹⁶ This approach, on its own, is open to criticism not merely because its results fail to reflect the full range of what was occurring in the countryside at the time but also because the definitions of success and failure in agriculture in this approach rest to a large extent on measures of economic performance or reflections upon it. Economic performance in agriculture is a useful starting-point for evaluating success and failure but little has been said about those people directly involved in agricultural

¹⁴ Burchardt, 'Introduction: Farming and the Countryside', p.1.

¹⁵ Fletcher, 'Economic Development', p.276.

¹⁶ Burchardt, J., 'Agricultural History, Rural History, or Countryside History?', *Historical Journal*, 50 2, (2007), 465-81, (p.465).

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production at the time and it would seem that varying degrees of fortitude and adaptability must have been required on their part in order to prosper or, in many cases, to survive, despite what has been said about the exaggeration of distress. It is those who were engaged in agriculture that must be turned to now.

Burchardt's appeal for a more subtle and detailed history of the countryside is timely. He asserts that such a study must be one that extends beyond the formulation of rural England merely as a site of agricultural production, a formulation that resulted from the economic relationship between the agricultural and industrial revolutions established by distinguished historians of modern Britain, including Tony Wrigley and F. M. L. Thompson.¹⁷ Alternative approaches to the history of the twentieth century countryside exist, with David Cannadine's *The Decline of the British Aristocracy* and Madeleine Beard's *English Landed Society in the Twentieth Century* standing as examples of a previously established but somewhat elitist approach to the countryside that Burchardt suggests must also be looked beyond.¹⁸ Burchardt cites the work on the landed gentry of Gordon Mingay as an example of how elitist subjects, he feels, have dominated the field of rural history outside of the study of agriculture.¹⁹ F.M.L. Thompson's work on rural social history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries consisted, much like that of Cannadine, Mingay and Beard, mostly of work on the aristocracy and landed gentry and the associated theme of

¹⁷ Ibid., p.466.

¹⁸ Beard, M., *English Landed Society in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1989); Cannadine, D., *The Decline of the British Aristocracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

¹⁹ Burchardt cites Mingay's, *The Gentry: the Rise and Fall of a Ruling Class* and *English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century*. Burchardt, 'Agricultural History', p.466.

landownership.²⁰ However, the demotic territory between the economic study of increasing levels of agricultural output and the cultural study of the lifestyles of the landowning elite remains largely uncharted. A cultural history that ties national identity to landscape exists but has lacked an agricultural dimension because the understanding of the relationships between farmers, class and status have not been explored and so farmers' attitudes to landscape have not been contextualised.²¹ Lacunae such as these demonstrate that work on the social relations of production in farming and particularly the circumstances of small-scale farmers is, logically, equally absent from the historiography of the interwar years.

The fact that landownership is a theme in the works already mentioned means it would not be true to say that a separation has taken place entirely between the studies of economic production in the countryside and of some of its inhabitants, merely that they have concentrated upon the British rural elite who were until the interwar years some of the greatest beneficiaries of that economic production and, according to F.M.L Thompson, often continued so to be.²² It is recognised in the work mentioned above on the aristocracy and gentry that much of the wealth that formed the economic basis for the lives of social distinction which the elite led came from rents paid for farms on land that they owned. However, it is not the case that the nature of the interrelationships

²⁰ Ibid., p.468.

²¹ Howkins, "'Lost Content'"; Matless; Mandler, P., 'Against "Englishness": English Culture and the Limits to Rural Nostalgia, 1850-1940', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6 7, (1997), 155-76; Miller, S., 'Urban Dreams and Rural Reality: Land and Landscape in English Culture, 1920-45', *Rural History*, 6 1, (1995), 89-102; Howkins, A., 'The Discovery of Rural England', in *Englishness*, ed. by Colls, R., and Dodd, P. (London: Routledge, 1986), pp.62-99.

²² Thompson, F.M.L., 'English Landed Society II', p.20.

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of the rent paying farmers, rent receiving landowners and largely propertyless rural workers has been adequately explored, especially in their exploitative dimensions, although the work of labour and social historians and some sociologists on related issues must not be ignored.²³

This inadequate treatment of rural society results partly from an inadequate study of agriculture itself. Generally, approaches to agriculture have been dominated by studies of its performance as a sector of the economy rather than by studies of the social relations of production that underpin that performance; that is, the interrelationship of social and economic factors in agriculture has been ignored. The separation of the study of the economy from social processes that Burchardt appears, unfortunately, to be perpetuating in arguing for a more detailed social and cultural history²⁴ is something that was rigorously opposed by Karl Marx.

Marx recognised the instrumentalism of the capitalist class and its economic apologists, such as J. B. Say, Thomas Robert Malthus, and John Stuart Mill,²⁵ in creating a political economy with an apparently scientific, and hence

²³ Griffiths, *Labour*; Mansfield, N., *English Farmworkers and Local Patriotism, 1900-1930* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001); Howkins, A., 'Peasants, Servants and Labourers: the Marginal Workforce in British Agriculture, c.1870-1914', *Agricultural History Review*, 42 1, (1994), 49-62; Howkins, A., 'Social History and Agricultural History' in, *Agricultural History Review*, 40 2, (1992), 160-3; Armstrong, A., *Farmworkers: a Social and Economic History, 1770-1980* (London: Batsford, 1988); Donajgradski, A. P., 'Twentieth Century Rural England: A Case for "Peasant Studies"?' , *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 16 3, (1985), 425-42; Howkins, A., *Poor Labouring Men: Rural Radicalism in Norfolk, 1870-1923* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985); Newby, H., *Deferential*; Bell and Newby; Mutch, A., 'Rural Society in Lancashire, 1840-1914' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 1961); Groves, R., *Sharpen the Sickle! The History of the Farmworkers' Union* (London: Porcupine Press, 1949).

²⁴ Burchardt, 'Agricultural History,' p.466.

²⁵ Barber, W. J., *A History of Economic Thought* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984).

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unquestionable,²⁶ set of laws that operated immutably, beyond human or social control.²⁷ These 'laws' he recognized to be, in reality, merely unjustified, untested and unproved theories,²⁸ the creation of which Maurice Dobb refers to as 'hypostatization' in bourgeois economics.²⁹

The implication of such claims was that existing social structures were merely the result of the naturally existing economic laws of competition that characterise bourgeois political economy and were, thus, rationally beyond human interference.³⁰ Marx shows that the operation of qualitatively different relations of production in earlier epochs contradicted such bourgeois claims for the mechanisms of their preferred economic system to be naturally occurring, likening bourgeois economists to theologians of differing beliefs for whom the only true religion is their own. Thus, Marx recognised that 'laws' of political economy were the creation of human beings and, as such, originated in society as part of a social and historical process whereby capital, or productive wealth, was accumulated as private property. The distribution of wealth was, therefore, the product of human behaviour and not of laws of free markets existing beyond the control of human beings.³¹

²⁶ Hearn, F., *Domination, Legitimation and Resistance: the Incorporation of the Nineteenth Century English Working Class* (Westport: Greenwood, 1978), p.138.

²⁷ Marx, *Capital: Vol. 1*, pp.174-5 fn.34.

²⁸ Gill, R. T., *Economics: a Text with Included Readings* (London: Prentice-Hall International, 1974), p.413.

²⁹ Dobb, M., *Political Economy and Capitalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), pp.127-133.

³⁰ Bottomore, T., and Rubel, M., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982; 1st published 1956), pp.77-8.

³¹ Poulantzas, N., *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1979; 1st published 1974); McLellan, D., *Karl Marx: Selected Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp.345-6.

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Marx insisted, very much like Burchardt, that the actual conditions of society can be revealed through its study. However, unlike Burchardt, Marx was clear that that this cannot be achieved without recognising that the type of distribution of economic factors amongst the members of a society, the form of production which that distribution creates and maintains and how that distribution is managed politically, legally and culturally, play a fundamental part in the varied experiences of the members of a society as they interact within the 'entire social edifice'; this is true because these processes of distribution, production and management regulate the range and type of choices that any member of a society can make – they place differential limits on human agency.³² Thus, it follows that the study of the economic relationships between human beings based on the distribution of productive resources amongst them and the potential productive power of those resources – the relations of production – plays a fundamental role in understanding society; economic production cannot be avoided in the study of society because production is essential to any society but it must be seen in the context of being production by humans. This production is based, obviously, on conditions 'directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past'³³ and, thus, is pre-structured and conforms to certain similar general conditions that together make up a particular, predominant, mode of production. He insists, however, on recognising the existence of 'endless variations and gradations in [...] appearance' of a predominant mode of production, such as variations in racial

³² Marx, *Capital Vol. 3*, p.927.

³³ McLelland quotes Marx, K., 1852, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. McLelland, D., *The Thought of Karl Marx* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p.63.

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relations,³⁴ which is testament to his dialectical understanding of society; empirical analysis of these endless variations is essential in proving or disproving the existence of the dialectical development of the general underlying processes and tendencies that would conform to the social relations of production of any particular predominant mode of production. The need for such analysis is as true of the countryside as of anywhere else and will be shown so to be by this study. Put simply, the development of society is not predetermined, nor is it governed by exogenous economic laws; but economic forces and the distribution of wealth amongst a society's population, emanating from the past, have enormous influence on any society and thus cannot be ignored in the study of social development. Thus, this study requires that farmers be analysed as producers but ones whose social existence is very much influenced by the extent of their productive agricultural capacity in the form of land and wealth.

The macroeconomics of 'productionist' analysis of agriculture have, generally, ignored the social relations of production, as has been suggested; that is to say that such analysis ignores the roles and fates of human beings in production, as recognised by Brian Short who stated that a separation of economic and anthropological approaches to the countryside had occurred in studies of farming in the events of the Second World War that follow, historically, immediately upon those events under consideration here. When he commented, 'To help redress this imbalance, this article will also point to the fact that previous studies have tended to separate production from its social

³⁴ Miles, R., *Racism* (London: Routledge, 1993; 1st published 1989), pp.38-40.

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context,³⁵ Short might just as well have been commenting upon existing studies of the interwar countryside. This is especially true considering that the War effectively brought to a conclusion many aspects of *laissez faire* political and economic thinking that had been severely tested during the interwar years and found wanting, the early developments of the replacement for which would form the bedrock for Wartime and post-War policy.³⁶

Prior to the requests of Burchardt for a wider, more culturally determined, field of rural study, and of Short for a reunification of social and economic approaches, Alun Howkins had been arguing for some years, almost in vain, for a more comprehensive social history of the countryside. Howkins had been criticizing the taking of too narrow an economic approach, observing that, 'There is seldom a human face seen in a subject which often describes the complex and varied experience of farm labour as a "factor of production".'³⁷ However, the tendency to ignore the stark reality of the inequalities produced by the development of the capitalist social relations of production in the countryside is at least as old as capitalism itself, as Terry Eagleton observes in *The Guardian* in a review of Roy Strong's *Visions of England*:

There was nothing timeless or idyllic about this landscape of capitalist landowners, grinding poverty, depopulation and a decaying artisanal class. [...] The great eighteenth-century landscape painters may show the landowner gazing benignly on his flocks of sheep and abundant

³⁵ Short, B., 'War in the Fields: the County War Agricultural Committees in England, 1939-1945', *Rural History*, 18 2, (2007), 217-44.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.218.

³⁷ Howkins, 'Social History', p.161.

harvest, but Strong reminds us that there is no sign of those who actually till the soil.³⁸

The interaction of human beings in the process of producing wealth in the foremost industrial activity of the countryside must be examined if the picture of an interwar rural England of experiences varying according to ownership of productive resources is to be sustained or rebutted; it is clear that support for such an examination exists.

Howkins' appeal can be seen as an extension to farm labour of an opinion voiced by T.W.Fletcher with regard to the farmers who employ agricultural labour. Fletcher observed that, 'Suffering and joy are attributes of human beings, in this context of the thousands of farmers who form part of the agricultural community',³⁹ which was made in relation to an earlier period, that of the late nineteenth century. This quote comes from a particularly appropriate source for two reasons. Firstly, this study is responding to demands for the reappraisal of an established interpretation of a period as one of blanket depression in agriculture much as Fletcher was writing about a period which was once regarded as being one of depression in agriculture so great and all-encompassing that it carried the title 'The Great Depression'. Fletcher's quote is important, secondly, because, this study's concentration is upon the experiences and relationships of one section of the farming community, namely, farmers, the same group to which he attaches importance.

³⁸ Eagleton, T., "'England's Dreaming'" (review of *Visions of England* by Roy Strong), *Guardian* reviews section, 2 July 2011.

³⁹ Fletcher, T.W., 'The Great Depression in English Agriculture, 1873-1896', *Economic History Review*, 13 3, (1961), 417-32, (p.422).

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It must be recognised that fluctuations in the number of farmers in existence over the interwar period might be one reasonable way of judging the fortunes of the industry as an addition to economic measures of output and makes necessary an attempt to establish the existence and magnitude of such fluctuations. The available statistics facilitate the establishment of the existence of any regional variations in farmers' fortunes which can then be analysed in the context of the economic fortunes of farmers of varying scales of production. This allows for differentiation to be made between the social experiences and economic fortunes of farmers of varying scales of production, any differences suggesting the need for a study of the relations of production that existed between small scale farmers and other status groups and classes in the social space. It thus acts to bridge the gap between the conflicting portrayals of the economy and society of the countryside in the interwar years that exist in the historiography, as outlined in Chapter One.⁴⁰

The most compelling reason, perhaps, for assessing the fortunes of farming through changes in the numbers of farmers involved in its undertaking across the interwar period is revealed in the particular understanding or perception that farmers appear to have of their own lifestyles as farmers, at least as far as this can be assessed through publications in which they have been quoted or represented. Agriculture was (and continues to be) represented as an occupation with responsibilities that exceeded those of industrial or professional employment and as one which offered the rewards of a vocation, constitutive of an existence not to be forsaken except under duress and thus unlikely to witness

⁴⁰ Chapter 1, above.

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the numbers of those engaged in it shrinking unduly. The interwar works of the farmer and journalist, A.G. Street, whose most popular work, *Farmer's Glory*, is well known within rural history circles and which describe the author's life as a farmer, recount the economic difficulties faced by farmers but are also replete with references to the rewards that arise from the pursuit of agriculture as a way of life rather than merely a means of employment.⁴¹ Elsewhere, the idea of a spiritual remuneration to be gained from farming is reproduced in suggestions of a certain satisfaction amongst farmers with the ultimate purpose of agricultural cultivation, the production of high quality foodstuffs, despite the demanding nature of the task. The implication is that farmers must be assumed to be reluctant to give up their vocation except where the most difficult of financial situations might demand it; thus, the chairman of the Central and Associated Chambers of Agriculture, George Lambert M.P., could be paraphrased as follows in the organisation's journal in 1935:

The farmer of today was no drowsy dullard, hunting 3 days a week and marketing, or rather going to market, the other 3 days. The agriculturalist, to be successful, had to work seven days a week; there was no question of Sunday off. British agriculturalists produced the finest stock and the largest crops.⁴²

The rewards emanating from farming went beyond the mere enjoyment of the means and ends of cultivation, however. The metaphysical rewards are

⁴¹ Street, A.G., *Farmer's Glory* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932a); Street, A.G., *Strawberry Roan* (London, Faber and Faber, 1932b).

⁴² *The Journal of the Central and Associated Chambers of Agriculture and the Agricultural Record*, July 1935.

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represented in various publications as being located in farmers' enjoyment of a sense of value to be found in their role in the very origins and existence of the nation. Montague Fordham, in a letter to the *Times* in May 1927, was typical of a long tradition of associating farmers' wellbeing with the wellbeing of the nation as a whole. Fordham argued that the threat to farmers' livelihoods presented by the fall in prices for agricultural produce would lead to national disaster:

Tenants, in common with all other cultivators, undoubtedly suffer from the vacillation and to a large extent the insufficiency of prices. This, the price problem, is, I suggest, the problem we have to solve if we are to save English civilisation from decay.⁴³

Such ideas can be found in the writings of agriculturalists of the nineteenth century, including William Cobbett's 1830 homage to the countryside, *Rural Rides*.⁴⁴

Bourdieu has exposed how the desire for association of social groups with 'ancient' cultural practices, such as those pursuits which, including agriculture, are redolent of the countryside, is used as a means of appropriating the type of cultural capital which has the potential for transformation into financial capital.⁴⁵ Such a process being undertaken by fractions of the agricultural community in the interwar years might well be seen as implying the existence of financial insecurity amongst its members. The following 1920 article from *The Yorkshire Herald* attests to the fact that farmers were certainly making the kind of

⁴³ *The Times*, 16 May 1927.

⁴⁴ Cobbett, W., *Rural Rides* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001; 1st published 1830).

⁴⁵ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp.279-80.

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attempts to associate themselves with a role in their nation's development and security that justified some kind of financial indulgence. The article describing the annual dinner of the Darlington Chamber of Commerce contained an account of the glowing tribute to tenant farmers offered by Brigadier-General H. Conyers-Surtees, D.S.O., C.B., M.V.O., M.P., himself a farmer and landowner, who 'proposed the toast of "The Tenant Farmers",' saying, 'It was this vigorous and virile race of yeomen that had made England great – (applause) - and in the future as in the past they would be always the backbone of the race (applause)'; so typical of the kind of tribute offered by agriculturalists to farmers at the time is this example that it was followed immediately by another in the reply from Mr. J.W. Fell who said that, 'the tenant farmer was a national asset'.⁴⁶

Subtly disguised claims to special treatment are found in other farming publications. The *NFU Record*, representing over 100,000 farmers by the 1920s,⁴⁷ was making representations for farming being 'the nation's most important industry' in 1922 whilst the *Mark Lane Express* which acted as a mouthpiece for farmers had been referring to agriculture as 'the oldest and most important industry of the country' in July 1921.⁴⁸ Similar sentiments were conveyed to Parliament by MPs during the debate on the repeal of the Corn Production Act in July 1921 where various speakers made assertions as to agriculture's importance, with Sir Harry Hope, for example, making the assertion

⁴⁶ *The Yorkshire Herald*, 3 January 1920.

⁴⁷ Cox, G., Lowe, P., and Winter, M., 'The Origins and Early Development of the National Farmers' Union', *Agricultural History Review*, 39 1, (1991), 30-47, (p.100).

⁴⁸ Quoted in *NFU Record*, June 1922.

that, 'The agricultural industry is the mainstay of this country'.⁴⁹ Thus, the metaphysical returns from farming to its practitioners were regularly expressed during the interwar period as arising from the often unrecognised importance of farmers to the continued material and spiritual health of the nation and its people who, by implication, owed them a debt of gratitude.

Appearances suggest, therefore, that it was considered by those associated with the agricultural industry that some elements of the intangible rewards that arose from farming could, in certain circumstances, be temporarily relinquished and that the debt of gratitude owed by the 'nation' to farmers could be quantified and ought to be paid in cash by the Government. This kind of quantification of otherwise ethereal qualities can certainly be seen as indicative of the first stages of a hardship that might lead to numbers of farmers being forced to leave their cherished way of life. Protection of farmers had a long history, including in the Corn Laws that protected grain prices in the first half of the nineteenth century and in certain duties on imports in the latter half,⁵⁰ but the recent precedent was in payments made to arable farmers under the Corn Production Act during and after the First World War, the origins of which lay at least partially in the evidence given by influential agriculturalists in support of farmers in 1915 to the Milner Committee which had been charged with investigating the possibility of increasing wartime food production in Britain. M.J.R. Dunstan, Principal of South Eastern Agricultural College, had made the intellectual connection between the productive activities of farmers and the

⁴⁹ NA/MAF/48/234, *Corn Production Acts Repeal Bill 1921*.

⁵⁰ Sir Robert Ensor, *England 1870-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988; 1st published 1936), pp.120, 349.

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effects on the physical and spiritual health of the realm in iterating that farmers must be appealed to through 'patriotism and profit', thereby giving a material dimension to the opinion of Trustram Eve, secretary to the Farmers' Club, which was that farmers were 'the most patriotic and reasonable Englishmen'.⁵¹ The intimation of an agricultural exceptionalism that was deserving of financial remuneration for its practitioners had extended as far as *The Times* by June 1927. The newspaper, an august and elitist pillar of the Establishment, was making the plea for any decline of agriculture to be considered through the prism of national wellbeing and to be addressed with some form of support, invoking the War of almost nine years' memory as a cautionary reminder of the dangers of neglect:

Apart from the War and other risks to our food supplies, it is surely essential for the endurance and welfare of the nation that an energetic and prosperous agriculture should be counted among the fundamental forms of industrial production.⁵²

Even greater significance should be attached to the attitude of MAF in regard to the ways in which Dunstan's intellectual connections between farming and national security and health were being replicated by the Ministry, even before *The Times* was imitating it. Despite its role as the advisor to Government on food issues, MAF was deepening its support for the farming fraternity throughout the interwar period by increasingly coming to represent it within

⁵¹ NA/MAF/42/9, *Departmental ('Milner') Committee 1915 on Home Production of Food (England and Wales); Papers and Signed Interim and Final Reports.*

⁵² *The Times*, 6 June 1927.

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Government rather than to mediate between food producers and Government⁵³ and was suggesting by as early as 1923 that agriculture's 'deep importance to the welfare of the nation warrants a peculiar interest being devoted by the State to the financial position of the food producer'.⁵⁴ The ultimate recognition of the esteem in which the members of the agricultural fraternity held the occupation of farming and its protagonists can be found in the following exchange between Sir Harry Verney, a representative of the 1915 Milner Committee, and M.J.R. Dunstan who clearly felt that some intangible element existed in the very existence of farmers in England that justified the exaltation of the agricultural producers of the nation:

Verney: Why should the farmer be placed in a privileged position outside the rest of the country, and not come under compulsion?

Dunstan: Simply because the English farmer is what he is.⁵⁵

Furthermore, agriculturalists have been revered and treated accordingly by mainstream commentators since the Second World War, reflecting the self-regard of its practitioners, even where agriculture as a process and, thus, as something quite abstract has been found wanting in some areas, such as animal welfare. Any familiarity with the coverage by the press of serious outbreaks of disease affecting British farm animals since the 1990s, such as bovine spongiform encephalitis and foot and mouth disease, might lead to some doubt over the extent to which such commentators have continued to support the

⁵³ Cox, "Listen to Us!", p.148; Brown, 'Agricultural Policy', pp.192-5; Smith, M.J., *Agricultural Support*, pp.69-86.

⁵⁴ NA/MAF/53/64.

⁵⁵ NA/MAF/42/9.

industry's business owners. However, it is notable that, until recently, it is rarely farmers as a group and the business methods and imperatives of the social class to which they belong that have been apportioned the blame for such outbreaks;⁵⁶ rather, an irresponsible individual farmer is sought as the origin of the problem and then structural factors, such as bureaucratic and governmental ineptitude are blamed for the subsequent spread of disease.⁵⁷ This evasion of responsibility continues despite the fact that it is recognised in academic circles that the technology employed by agriculturalists in their drive for profit has played a role in the likely spread of disease by subverting scientific attempts at objectivity in the study of animal disease in a manner that makes it a microcosm of the fate of science in the wider society.⁵⁸ The reverence for the farmer is, thus, reproduced in the twenty-first century and is exemplified by Graham Harvey writing gushingly in the *Daily Mail* in 2007 on the subject of livestock-keepers, irrespective of the disasters that had afflicted British farm animals since the 1990s:

I once heard a farmer describe the job of keeping livestock as "a calling". Indeed, when you look at the sort of money dairy, beef and sheep farmers have been making in the past few years, it would be hard to come up with any other reason for doing the job. [...] This is probably just as well when you consider what they do for the nation. Livestock areas are principally the grassland regions of Britain - the rolling green

⁵⁶ Burchardt, 2008, 'Introduction: Farming and the Countryside', pp.2-3.

⁵⁷ Brassley, P., 2008, 'Murrains to Mad Cows: a Very Short History of Governments, People and Animal Diseases', in *The Contested Countryside: Rural Politics and Land Controversy in Modern Britain*, ed. by Burchardt, J., and Conford, P. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), pp.117-44, (pp.136-7).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.129.

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hills, the heather moors, the river valleys, the salt-marshes of river estuaries.⁵⁹

The spiritual benefits to the nation of the maintenance of agriculture found in the modern conservatism of the *Daily Mail* might appear to have been inspired directly by journalism from the interwar period. Similarly, it is certainly the case that the reverence for the countryside that consumes Graham Harvey's piece is seen to be a replication of earlier writing. The *Lincoln Gazette* was eulogising on the countryside in 1923:

There is no picture more pleasant than that which the harvest in this island invokes in the memory. The sunlit work, the mirth and amenities of the harvest field, the genial humours and associations of the harvest wagons, the harvest-home, the harvest festival and thanksgiving – how great a part these play in the immemorial tradition of our country life.⁶⁰

The relationship between the health of the nation and the countryside with its agriculture was reiterated in 1935 in *The Home Farmer* which states in 'A Greeting for 1935!' by Robin Field that, 'without a happy and contented countryside we cannot have a happy and contented Old England.'⁶¹

The evidence and opinions presented above form an encomium to farmers and to the farming way of life and to the countryside in which it was

⁵⁹ Harvey, G., 'Farmers Deserve Better Treatment, Says Agricultural Expert', *Daily Mail*, 1 August 2007
http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=473930&in_page_id=1770 [first accessed 10 August 2007; last accessed 24 May 2014].

⁶⁰ *Lincoln Gazette*, 11 August 1923.

⁶¹ *Home Farmer: the Official Organ of the Milk Marketing Board*, January 1935.

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continued. Burchardt even locates in the way of life of the farmer the solution to the alienation of human beings in a commodity society,⁶² an alienation which is derived, it would appear, given the terminology used and its context, from Marx.⁶³ It is a tribute to the tranquil benefits of a life of agricultural production that is even able to ignore the oft quoted benefit of the 'independence' that remains so beloved of the farmer,⁶⁴ leaving little effort to be made in imagining the reluctance that would surely have been felt by any farming practitioner forced to relinquish their occupation and lifestyle. There can be little doubt that such reluctance would imply that any overall fall in the numbers of farmers operating between the Wars to be revealed through statistical analysis of the period would be representative of some measure of economic distress being suffered by farmers during the period.

The above extract from the *Lincoln Gazette* of 1923 is particularly evocative of a pastoral vision of peace and harmony but a close look at the article by Robin Field from the *Home Farmer*, quoted above, reveals a slightly different literary tone in existence than that being used twelve years earlier in the *Gazette*. 'Let us try to capture a new note of enthusiasm', implores Robin Field in the *Home Farmer*, continuing, 'We have seen the farmer work under a cloud; we have seen the farmer gradually become forgotten like the townsman,

⁶² Burchardt, 'Introduction: Farming and the Countryside', pp.3-4. However, it must be noted that he fails to recognise that the farmer's *de facto* alienation would once again materialise in the exchange of his produce as a commodity for money. Marx, K., *Grundrisse*, (London: Penguin, 1993; 1st published 1939), p.196.

⁶³ Mandel, E., and Novack, G., *The Marxist Theory of Alienation* (London: Pathfinder, 2001), p.9; Lukács, G., *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (London: Merlin Press Ltd., 1971), pp.1-26.

⁶⁴ Burchardt, 'Introduction: Farming and the Countryside', pp.4-5; Newby et al., 'Farming for Survival', pp.38-70.

and if we like we can remedy it all.⁶⁵ Little doubt can exist that the cheerfulness of 1923's *Lincoln Gazette* has been replaced with something more cautious as a result of some intervening disruption; indeed, Field refers to agricultural policy as having become a 'neglected Cinderella'.⁶⁶ What remains to be seen is whether the likely origins of this cautionary note can be deduced from trends in the statistics on the numbers of farms and farmers in England in the interwar period.

Changing Numbers of Farmers in Interwar Rural England

The identification of variations in the numbers of farmers over time in Britain might appear initially to be a relatively simple task, given the existence of the *United Kingdom Census of Population (Census)* which has been taken every tenth year since 1801, with the exception, due to wartime considerations, of 1941. It includes, in its publication of regional statistics, aggregate totals for the numbers of people working in the various sectors of production, these being broken down also into a more detailed categorization of occupations.⁶⁷ Simplicity does not exist, however, in the calculation from the *Census* of the numbers of those involved in the different branches of agriculture. Difficulties were recognised in 1934 by Bridges who was examining agricultural employment trends for the Agricultural Economics Society; Bridges states, 'In presenting the Census and other employment statistics I fully realise that they are not the ideal material for a detailed discussion of changes in the industry. Still, they are the

⁶⁵ *Home Farmer*, January 1935.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Toyne, P., and Newby, P.T., *Techniques in Human Geography* (London: Macmillan, 1974), pp.2-3.

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best material available.⁶⁸ R.B. Jones was recognising the same existing difficulties in 1957, saying that in England and Wales at that later date, it was 'doubtful even whether we know the total number of farmers'.⁶⁹ Difficulties arise even from the delineation of the geographical extent of this study, which is of England; given that the most relevant published *Census* statistics refer either to individual counties or to the combined England and Wales, it is the latter, in the absence of statistics for England alone, to which will be referred here in order to gain a general picture of trends in numbers of farmers during the interwar years.⁷⁰

One deficiency of the *Census*, of course, is found in the ten year gaps between issues which means that short term changes that might be related to specific events are difficult to trace; therefore, use of other sources, notably the annually collected *Agricultural Statistics: Report on the Acreage under Crops and the Number of Live Stock in England and Wales (Agricultural Statistics)*⁷¹ which detail numbers of existing agricultural holdings, in conjunction with *Census* material should help to determine trends in farmer numbers. Longer term trends ought, logically, to be easier to identify through the *Census* and it would be useful for this study to be able to track changes over the years from 1921 to 1941. These two specific years of collection could be seen, roughly but as accurately as possible given the limitations of the years of collection, as acting to bookend the period under examination in this thesis, but establishing them as

⁶⁸ Bridges, A., 'Scientific Progress and Agricultural Employment: Discussion', *Journal of the Proceedings of the Agricultural Economics Society*, 4 1, (1935), 55-76, (p.57).

⁶⁹ Jones, R.B., 'Farm Classification in Britain – an Appraisal', *Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 12 2, (1957), 201-24, (p.202).

⁷⁰ Figure 2.1 and Ch.2 fn.86; HMSO, *Census, 1911*, Table 3 (p.16).

⁷¹ Figure 2.1 and Ch.2 fn.86; Ch.2 fn.13.

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such through the *Census* material is made impossible by the non-existence of the *Census* for 1941,⁷² as understood by Holderness who recognises that 'what happened' in terms of farmer numbers between 1931 and 1951 is extremely difficult to assess.⁷³ The *Census* alone is useful only in estimating numbers of farmers up until 1931 but the Ministry of Agriculture's *National Farm Survey of England and Wales: a Summary Report* (hereafter, *National Farm Survey Report*), published in 1946, details numbers of farmers and also of agricultural holdings for 1941;⁷⁴ however, as will be shown, there are difficulties of comparison between its data and that provided in the *Census*. Reference will also be made to other contemporary interwar, and more recent, texts containing statistical data on numbers employed in agriculture but it will become clear that these present their own problems.⁷⁵

Bridges, quoted above, may have been alluding to other problems, however. These are the same problems encountered by Whitby in 1966 and relate to variations merely in the actual presentation of the data in the *Census* publications themselves, especially problems in variations from one decade to the next.⁷⁶ One example of such a problem is in the categories into which farmers are divided; the 1911 *Census* has separate categories for 'Farmers' and 'Market Gardeners' in England and Wales and, whilst the two categories appear in the 1921 publication, there are now found added categories numbering

⁷² Toyne and Newby, p.2.

⁷³ Holderness, B.A., 'The Farmers in the Twentieth Century', in *The Vanishing Countryman*, ed. by Mingay, G.E. (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 101-14, (p.102).

⁷⁴ MAF, *National Farm Survey*.

⁷⁵ HMSO, *Census, 1931*, Table 1 (p.1); HMSO, *Census, 1921*, Table 2 (pp.13-16); HMSO, *Census, 1911*, Table 3 (p.16); MAF, *National Farm Survey*, Table 1 (p.11).

⁷⁶ Whitby, M.C., 'Farmers in England and Wales, 1921-61', *Farm Economist*, 11 2, (1966), 83-94, (p.84).

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poultry farmers as well as farmers connected with 'Flower and Seed Growing and Nursery Gardening' whilst the number of subdivisions within the 'Agriculture' category has increased from thirteen to 123 or, with the inclusion of forestry, 131.⁷⁷ The subdivisions under 'Agriculture' have then been significantly rationalised for the 1931 *Census* which for the first time contains a single category denoting the number of farmers.

Effective deciphering of the *Census* category of 'Agriculture' ('Agricultural Occupations' in 1931) to establish totals for numbers of farmers in England and Wales for the years 1911, 1921 and 1931 can be achieved. The resulting numbers, especially those relating to change between 1921 and 1931, have to be treated with caution, not least because, as noted above, the numbers of subdivisions have been drastically reduced between those years but also because it appears that a significant degree of reclassification of occupations has taken place; for example, many agricultural labourers seem to have been reclassified under 'Gardeners, Nurserymen, Seedsmen, Florists' in 1931 which means that, taken at face value, the number employed in these occupations has increased by over 95,000, or 75 percent, to 220,971 from 125,777, whilst the number of agricultural labourers appears to have fallen to 494,753 from a figure for 1921 which is very difficult to calculate but was given in 1938 by Lord Addison, in reference to the *Census*, to be 743,313.⁷⁸ This would represent a fall of such magnitude as to be almost unbelievable, especially when contrasted with the figure given by Addison for the number of labourers employed in 1936,

⁷⁷ HMSO, *Census, 1931*, Table 1 (p.1); HMSO, *Census, 1921*, Table 2 (pp.13-16); HMSO, *Census, 1911*, Table 3 (p.16); MAF, *National Farm Survey*, Table 1 (p.11).

⁷⁸ Lord Addison, pp.285-6.

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which is 636,000, a figure that would, thus, represent a large increase on that for 1931. Whether such reclassification would have extended to categories including numbers of farmers is difficult to ascertain although numbers of farmers do appear to have been given with more clarity than those of agricultural labourers in the *Census* across the years.⁷⁹

The results of the calculation of farmer numbers from the *Census* show that there was a 15 percent increase in farmer numbers of 34,226 from 228,788⁸⁰ in 1911 to 263,014 in 1921⁸¹ and then a 5.6 percent fall of 14,768 to 248,246 in 1931.⁸² Thus, the figures show an upward movement in farmer numbers during the period including the First World War and the three years following it, when farming is regarded to have moved from being in a stable to an exceedingly prosperous condition, and then a fall during the 1920s and into 1931 that was not as large as the rise from 1911 to 1921. Whitby's figures demonstrate a similar trend but indicate a more substantial fall between 1921 and 1931.⁸³ This fall during the 1920s occurred during a period regarded, as has been shown above, as having been one of difficulty in British agriculture, especially during the years from 1922 to 1925 and from 1929 to 1932 and despite the variations in opinions regarding the extent of prosperity and decline that have already been commented upon. Documents from the Ministry of

⁷⁹ HMSO, *Census, 1931*, Table 1 (p.1); HMSO, *Census, 1921*, Table 2 (pp.13-16); HMSO, *Census, 1911*, Table 3 (p.16); MAF, *National Farm Survey*, Table 1 (p.11).

⁸⁰ An estimated 17,000 – 19,000 smallholdings were created between 1911 and 1921 so the large increase in numbers in this period may be attributable, partly to this. Smith, N.R., *Land for the Small Man: the English and Welsh Experience with Publicly Supplied Small Holdings, 1860-1937* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1946), pp.234-6.

⁸¹ Whitby has this figure as 264,093. Whitby, p.85.

⁸² Figure 2.1 and Ch.2 fn.86; HMSO, *Census, 1931*, Table 1 (p.1); HMSO, *Census, 1921*, Table 2 (pp.13-16); HMSO, *Census, 1911*, Table 3 (p.16); MAF, *National Farm Survey*, Table 1 (p.11).

⁸³ Whitby, p.84.

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Agriculture from 1923 lend support to statistics showing falling numbers of farmers during the early 1920s, mentioning farmers who owned their own farms, to whom this thesis will return, 'having been forced to retire from farming owing to its general unprofitability and to the new and onerous obligations which they, in many cases, unavoidably assumed in circumstances of extreme difficulty.'⁸⁴ Newby has written of farmers being 'rendered destitute in large numbers' after 1929.⁸⁵



Sources other than the *Census* are of differing levels of help in clarifying the information on absolute numbers of farmers between 1911 and 1931. Addison puts a much higher estimate than is to be found in the *Census* on the numbers that might be termed 'farmers', referring to the number of 'Employers' who were 'Occupied in Agriculture and Horticulture in Great Britain'. His figure of 364,602 for England and Wales for 1911 is substantially higher than the 228,788 shown to be farmers in the 1911 *Census* but is of little value as it

⁸⁴ NA/MAF/53/64.

⁸⁵ Newby, *Country Life*, p.171.

⁸⁶ Figures do not include data for Monmouth. HMSO, *Census, 1921*, Table 2 (pp.13-16); HMSO, *Census, 1931*, Table 1 (p.1); MAF, *National Farm Survey*, Table 1 (p.11).

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includes various categories, some of the occupants of which are clearly not the direct proprietors of farm businesses, such as 'relatives assisting in the work of the farm, farm bailiffs, foremen [sic]'. Others, such as 'graziers' and 'those engaged in Horticultural Occupations included under the headings "Managerial" and "Working on Own Account"', could be considered to be farmers but it is, therefore, difficult to understand why they are not simply categorised as such in the *Census* which is from where Addison derives his figures.⁸⁷

It is of note, however, that whilst the actual numbers that Addison quotes differ from the ones provided here, the overall trends he shows are similar, the most notable being a fall in numbers of 'Employers' of 5.2 percent between 1921 and 1931 which is not greatly dissimilar to the 5.6 percent fall in the number of 'Farmers' noted above.⁸⁸

Astor and Rowntree serve merely to cloud the issue further with their unreferenced 1939 statement that, 'There are approximately 300,000 persons describing themselves as farmers, 250,000 in England and Wales and 75,000 in Scotland.'⁸⁹ It is immediately obvious that their arithmetic is faulty, the figures that they give for England and Wales and for Scotland adding up to 325,000 rather than the 300,000 that they quote and there is nothing to indicate which figure should be considered incorrect or whether it should be both. Of more interest than their arithmetic is their assertion that, 'Their [farmers'] numbers have remained remarkably stable in the last 60 years,' which appears to be a

⁸⁷ Lord Addison, pp.285-6.

⁸⁸ Figure 2.1 and Ch.2 fn.86; HMSO, *Census, 1911*, Table 3 (p.16); Ch.2 fn.13.

⁸⁹ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, 2nd edn., p.230.

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misinterpretation of Lord Ernle's assertion of 1936, Ernle having merely compared numbers of farmers in 1871 and 1931 and found them similar but with no reference to figures or stability in between.⁹⁰ The notion of stability is not borne out by reference to Addison who shows that the number of male 'Employers' had risen from 313,398 to 385,344 in the 30 years between 1891 and 1921, a rise of 23 percent, and had been falling until 1931, numbers hardly depicting stability. The figures of Astor and Rowntree as well as their assertion of stability would also be disputed by Howkins who, much more recently, has published figures for numbers of farmers in England and Wales that suggest that there were as many as 475,633 farmers in 1901 and that this number had fallen rapidly by 1911 to 383,333,⁹¹ a figure fairly close to that of Addison. Howkins includes women farmers in his estimates, but only for 1901, which, despite its laudability in striving for historical accuracy, further confuses the issue since they are not, apparently, included for 1911; it must be added that the figures quoted above direct from the *Census* were a combination of the numbers of farmers of both sexes. The disparity between estimates is, again, hardly helped by D.A.E. Harkness who, in presenting his paper to the *Agricultural Economics Society* in 1934, stated, 'The number of farmers and persons working on their own account is estimated at about 360,000 (300,000 in England and Wales and 60,000 in Scotland).'⁹²

⁹⁰ Lord Ernle, p.431.

⁹¹ Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, p.9.

⁹² Harkness, p.37; HMSO, *Census, 1931*, Table 1 (p.1); HMSO, *Census, 1921*, Table 2 (pp.13-16); HMSO, *Census, 1911*, Table 3 (p.16); MAF, *National Farm Survey*, Table 1 (p.11).

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The fact that the figures of Harkness are for 1934 and of Astor and Rowntree for 1939 at least serve as a reminder that numbers of farmers for the years after 1931 have not yet been addressed here. It seems fairly clear that while the *Census* will help illuminate general trends in numbers of farmers in England and Wales in the first third of the twentieth century, further sources will have to be consulted in an attempt to establish any patterns of change from 1931 to 1941 since, as stated, no *Census* was taken in 1941. The difference between Harkness' figure of 300,000 for numbers of farmers in 1934 and that of Astor and Rowntree of 250,000 for 1939, if taken as correct, would indicate that there were significant falls in numbers of farmers during the 1930s, especially if Addison's figure of 365,283 for 1931 were to be taken into account.⁹³ However, it should have become clear that whilst these figures may be suggestive of a general downward trend in numbers of farmers, the true extent of any fall remains to be explicated.

The assessment of numbers of farmers after 1931 leads merely to uncertainty, some suggestions as to the likelihood of increases in farmer numbers between 1931 and 1951 being contradicted by a contraction in the number of farm holdings in existence.⁹⁴ This uncertainty is augmented by there being no available *Census* data between 1931 and 1951. Uncertainty over numbers of farmers existing just after the end of the interwar period can be partially overcome through the use of data from the *National Farm Survey*

⁹³ Harkness, p.37; Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, 2nd edn., p.230; Lord Addison, pp.285-6.

⁹⁴ Holderness, 'Farmers', p.102.

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Report which is useful in assessing farmers' numbers in the period from 1931 to 1941.

The data presented in the Ministry of Agriculture's *National Farm Survey Report* was collected between 1941 and 1943, 'to assess both the needs and the capacity of each farm for increased food production' and 'to assist local war-time administration in the widest sense'.⁹⁵ An assessment was made of every 'agricultural holding' of five acres or more in size and the numbers of 'occupiers' of those holdings was recorded. The result is that reasonably accurate figures for the numbers of farmers in existence is available for 1941,⁹⁶ a year outside of the scope of this study but sufficiently close to make its consideration worthwhile. It might intuitively appear that the omission of the quite significant number of holdings of less than five acres in extent would make inappropriate any comparison between the numbers of occupiers recorded in the *National Farm Survey Report* and the numbers of those working in agriculture as employers or managers recorded in the *Census* of 1931, an observation made in the report.⁹⁷ However, the report continues by noting that figures published in the *Census* would have excluded 'the occupiers of spare-time, accommodation and residential holdings, as these would have been entered under their main trade',⁹⁸ and whilst it is not the case that all farms under five acres in size would have been run on a spare-time basis so that the occupiers would not have appeared as 'farmers' in the *Census*, it is reasonable to say that this would have

⁹⁵ MAF, *National Farm Survey*, p.1.

⁹⁶ The figures for farm numbers in the *National Farm Survey* were based on those that would have formed the *Agricultural Statistics* for 1941. Ibid., p.2.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p.11 note*.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

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been the case in the large majority of cases; the *Census*, then, effectively, recorded the numbers of full-time farmers, the vast majority of whom would have been occupiers of holdings of over five acres in size. This inference that occupiers of holdings of fewer than five acres were unlikely to be classed as farmers in the *Census* because farming would not be their main trade is given more weight by the observation in the *National Farm Survey Report* that even the dependence upon farming of some of the occupiers of larger holdings than five acres was questionable and that 'some of the full-time farmers might more accurately have been classed part-time, and those in the part-time class as "regular" spare-time occupiers.'⁹⁹ Given that the report publishes a figure for the number of full-time occupiers of agricultural holdings, it can be assumed, even if with a little trepidation, that an assessment of changes of the numbers of full-time farmers between 1931 and 1941 can be made by comparing the numbers of people classified under 'Farmers' in the 1931 *Census* with the number of occupiers of full-time holdings shown in Table 1 of the *National Farm Survey Report*. The report gives the figure of 215,900 as representing full-time farmers which is smaller by 32,346 than the 1931 *Census* figure of 248,246 that can be regarded as roughly representing full-time farmers.¹⁰⁰ These figures, therefore, show a thirteen percent fall in the number of farmers between 1931 and 1941. Overall, between 1921 and 1941, the number of full-time farmers on holdings of five acres or more in England and Wales appears to have fallen by 47,114 or just under 18 percent.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.10.

¹⁰⁰ HMSO, *Census, 1931*, p.1; MAF, *National Farm Survey*, p.1.

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Examination of *Census* and other sources demonstrates that the estimation of the fortunes of agriculture as measured through the calculation of numbers of farmers is fraught with difficulty but that does not mean that it is not worthwhile. The examination here has achieved its goal insofar as it has demonstrated that general trends can be elucidated from the available data. The trend over the interwar years was towards a fall in the number of full-time farmers; that this fall was as high as 18 percent suggests that, when measured by the numbers of farm business operators, agriculture was subject to considerable change and suggests that around one in five farmers who might have been classified as full-time in 1921 have either disappeared from the industry or passed into another classification, the most likely being that for part-time farmers. Agriculture may not have suffered too badly, overall, when figures for growth in the sector are considered as the appropriate measure of performance¹⁰¹ but it appears that the bald economic evaluation is somewhat lacking when the effects on those running a large number of the sector's full-time businesses are to be considered the measure of success or failure, decline or prosperity.

Caveats must be drawn to the use of this figure of 32,346 as a definitive measure of the fall in numbers of full-time farmers between 1931 and 1941. The *National Farm Survey Report* tends to give the impression of overstating the numbers of both full-time and part-time farmers in existence on its own terms by just under 5 percent in Table 1 by listing the number of holdings rather than of

¹⁰¹ Brassley, 'British Farming', pp.187-99.

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occupiers, given that some 10,000 occupiers occupy more than one holding.¹⁰² Another issue that must be taken into consideration is that some persons enumerated in the *Census* as farmers would have been farming as a primary occupation on a holding of over five acres but with a secondary occupation that would have discounted them from counting as one of the 215,900 full-time farmers in the *National Farm Survey Report*; this would suggest that there were fewer full-time farmers and more part-time farmers in 1931 as defined in 1941 by the *National Farm Survey Report* than shown in the *Census* and so the fall in numbers between 1931 and 1941 would be smaller. Whether this simply means that there was a larger fall in full-time farmers between 1921 and 1931 and that the overall fall of 47,114 between 1921 and 1941 should be recognised as accurate would depend on what definitions were used to classify persons as 'Farmers' in the 1921 *Census*. Conversely, it is also possible that the *Census* may have underestimated the numbers of farmers by classifying those who appear in the *National Farm Survey Report* as 'Part-time' occupiers of farms under another occupation altogether. This occupation may have existed within the overall occupational category of 'Agriculture', such as 'Agriculture, employers, managers, etc.' as stated in the *National Farm Survey Report*, or in another overall category, given that many part-time occupiers of holdings had additional occupations. Thus, it is also possible that the 18 percent fall in the

¹⁰² MAF, *National Farm Survey*, p.11.

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numbers of farmers between 1921 and 1941 mentioned above is an underestimate.¹⁰³

Another significant area of incompatibility between the data from the *Census* and the *National Farm Survey Report* concerns the categorization of producer retailers, that is, farmers who marketed their own produce directly to customers, often farming 'on the fringes of the urban area' and 'within the centre itself'.¹⁰⁴ Producer retailers were classified in the *National Farm Survey Report* as farmers but were just as likely to have been categorised as retailers in the *Census* since their income was derived from direct retailing, the *National Farm Survey Report* itself stating that, for its own purposes, 'Producer retailers might with advantage have been given a class to themselves'.¹⁰⁵ The effect would be for the *Census* to underestimate the numbers of farmers in existence and, given that in the mid-1930s there were 45,000 to 50,000 producer retailers selling milk and dairy products alone,¹⁰⁶ any underestimation might be quite considerable and, in the event, would make comparison of the *Census* with data from the *National Farm Survey Report* quite misleading.

It should be recognised that there is far more likelihood of inaccuracy occurring in the *Census* data on numbers of farmers than in that of the *National Farm Survey Report* simply as a result of the method of data collection. Data for the *National Farm Survey Report* was collected by field reporters who visited

¹⁰³ HMSO, *Census, 1931*, Table 1 (p.1); HMSO, *Census, 1921*, Table 2 (pp.13-16); HMSO, *Census, 1911*, Table 3 (p.16); MAF, *National Farm Survey*, Table 1 (p.11).

¹⁰⁴ Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, Economic Series No.38; Report of the Reorganisation Commission for Milk* (London: HMSO, 1933), p.28.

¹⁰⁵ MAF, *National Farm Survey*, pp.10-11.

¹⁰⁶ Baker, S., *Milk to Market: Forty Years of Milk Marketing* (London: Heinemann, 1980), p.17.

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farms and recorded the information themselves whilst *Census* returns are usually filled out by the individuals named on the forms who might distort the information they gave. Farmers may have regarded the *Census* merely to be the kind of Government interference of which they were suspicious and resentful, as shown in the evidence given to the Milner Committee in 1915 of Mr. J.R. Dunstan, Principal of an agricultural college, who speaks of farmers' suspicion of anything non-local except the National Farmers Union;¹⁰⁷ further evidence of farmers' suspicion and resentment of dealings with officialdom is presented in later chapters of this work.¹⁰⁸

More pertinently, farmers may have considered that the *Census* had potential for use for evaluation of their incomes. It is quite possible, therefore, that part-time farmers would have referred to themselves under their secondary or ancillary occupation in the *Census*, rather than as farmers, in an attempt to conceal their farming activities and levels of income. This is a tendency to which farmers have been shown by Newby et al. to be prone¹⁰⁹ and one that was directly stated to be existent, especially amongst smaller scale farmers, by the agricultural economist J.Hammond in a discussion held by the Agricultural Economics Society in 1954;¹¹⁰ similarly, Sturmeay attests to farmers being highly protective of information on their financial status with regard to mortgage concealment on the part of farmers.¹¹¹ The result of part-time farmers appearing under an occupation other than that of 'Farmer' in the *Census* would

¹⁰⁷ NA/MAF/42/9.

¹⁰⁸ Chapter 6, below.

¹⁰⁹ Newby et al., *Property*, p.143.

¹¹⁰ Wynne, J., 'Large and Small Scale Farming in England and Wales Today', *Journal of the Proceedings of the Agricultural Economics Society*, 11 1, (1954), 20-47.

¹¹¹ Sturmeay, S.G., 'Owner-Farming 1900 to 1950', p.291.

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be an underestimation of the numbers of farmers shown by the *Census* to exist as farmers. Such an activity would accord with farmers' resentment at being a source of Government tax revenue, taxes being bitterly resented by farmers as a perceived subsidy to urban dwellers.¹¹² Evidence of such resentment comes from the *British Farmer and Journal of Agriculture* of 5 November 1921 which stated in its 'N.F.U notes',

A resolution from the Helmsley Branch was adopted [...] asking that agricultural employers and workers should be exempted from contributing [...] for any National Insurance scheme for the relief of the unemployed, for the reason that there is very little unemployment among agricultural workers.

This seems to demonstrate either disingenuousness on the part of the NFU or simple self-deception, given that Howkins has detailed fairly significant rural unemployment in 1921 to 1922;¹¹³ definite evidence of such unemployment was revealed in a report to the Ministry of Agriculture (MAF) in 1930.¹¹⁴

Other circumstances existed that may have led to an underestimation of farmers in the *Census*; for example, it is possible that some part-time farmers who had become unemployed from their ancillary occupations may have been reluctant to allow themselves to be classified as farmers because of the effect that they may have perceived that this would have had upon any entitlement to unemployment benefit. This possibility certainly seems to be reflected in events

¹¹² Newby et al., *Property*, p.94.

¹¹³ Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men*, pp.134-9.

¹¹⁴ NA/MAF/38/18, *Special Committee on Agricultural Policy; Memorandum on the Depression in Arable Farming, 1930*.

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surrounding two schemes to supply smallholdings to unemployed men in Cleveland, a report on their circumstances being completed in June 1934:

In each case, the number of applicants have been limited, but this seems to have been due to doubts in the men's minds as to the effect on their Unemployment Benefit, especially is this true of the men with families [sic].¹¹⁵

Precision cannot be achieved in the assessment of any changes that took place in the numbers of farmers in England and Wales over the interwar years due to inconsistencies in the data existing in the sources heretofore addressed. Contention has arisen from the measure of changes in farmer numbers by the cross referencing of the data in the *Census*, the *National Farm Survey Report* and other sources as well as from inconsistencies in the *Census* itself. Inconsistencies in the *Census* result from changes in methods of categorization from one decade to the next and the suggestion of possible flaws in the process of recording data caused by reticence amongst part-time farmers in categorising themselves as farmers and the erroneous categorization as farmers of those who occupied agricultural land but should have been otherwise recorded, as they were in the *National Farm Survey Report*.¹¹⁶ However, the existing evidence does seem to be consistent in showing a fall in the number of farmers, a trend that contradicts Brassley's assertion, based apparently on a sample taken from

¹¹⁵ NA/MAF/48/94, *Depressed Areas Investigation: Provision of Smallholdings for Unemployed, 1932/4*.

¹¹⁶ MAF, *National Farm Survey*, p.11.

the *Census* for Devon, that farmer numbers remained stable between the two world wars.¹¹⁷

It is important to note that the most conservative estimate that can be made of changes in the number of farmers is arrived at by adding together the number of full-time and part-time farmers shown to be in existence in 1941 by the *National Farm Survey Report* and taking the result as representing the number of farmers in existence in 1941; the total of 248,400 is still over 14,500 fewer than that shown in the *Census* for 1921, a fall of 5.5 percent. This fall in numbers is a much lower estimate than the 18 percent fall presented above but, as the evidence shown above also suggests, it is likely that figures for farmer numbers presented in the *Census* for 1921 and 1931 are an underestimation, especially with regard to producer retailers, and, furthermore, that many farmers classified as 'Part-time' in the *National Farm Survey Report* should not have been included in the total number of farmers¹¹⁸ making the above 1941 figure of 248,400 something of an exaggeration. It is likely that the genuine percentage figure for the change in the numbers of farmers in the interwar years lies somewhere between 5.5 and 18, but there is little doubt that falls in numbers of farmers operating in English agriculture took place. Better accuracy in assessing the actual extent of the decline in farmer numbers demands that supplementary evidence should be sought. This may be found, rather than in the unreliable statistics on the numbers of farmers themselves, in analysis of changes in the

¹¹⁷ Brassley, 'Wheelwright', p.236.

¹¹⁸ MAF, *National Farm Survey*, p.10.

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numbers of actual farm operations of farmers which will be undertaken in the next section.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ HMSO, *Census, 1931*, Table 1 (p.1); HMSO, *Census, 1921*, Table 2 (pp.13-16); HMSO, *Census, 1911*, Table 3 (p.16); MAF, *National Farm Survey*, Table 1 (p.11).

Changing Numbers of Farms and Farmers in Interwar Rural England

A reasonable expectation exists that changes in numbers of farms, or 'holdings', would be reflective of trends in the numbers of the farmers who farm them. Data on numbers of farm operations exists in the form of statistics on agricultural holdings in the annually published *Agricultural Statistics* which detail specifically the numbers of such holdings. The *National Farm Survey Report* indicates that these statistics can be regarded as a relatively good guide to trends in changes in the numbers of farmers over time, if not to absolute numbers of farmers at any given time, because the statistics are consistent in the manner in which they have been collected and presented,¹²⁰ unlike the data on numbers of farmers given in the *Census* which, as has been shown, appears to vary from one publication to the next. Indeed, the *National Farm Survey Report* makes it clear that it was to a similar interpretation of what constituted a farm holding that was adhered both by the Field Reporters responsible for collecting data for the *National Farm Survey Report* and the Crop Reporters for the *Agricultural Statistics*. Thus, the numbers for farm holdings over five acres in size published in the *Agricultural Statistics* appear to have been recorded and calculated in much the same way as for the *National Farm Survey Report*.¹²¹ Additional value exists in these figures in that data is published for England, the focus of this study, as well as for England and Wales.

¹²⁰ MAF, *National Farm Survey*, p.7.

¹²¹ Some farms were comprised of more than one holding in reality but these were merged where they formed a single occupancy to be represented as a single farm in the statistics for the *National Farm Survey Report*. Grigg suggests that a similar type of merging had occurred in the presentation of farm holdings in the *Agricultural Statistics*. Ibid., p.7; Grigg, 'Farm Size', p.182.

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One issue that might be considered of significance revealed by sources from the interwar period is that some farmers occupied more than one holding and thus that numbers of holdings shown to exist in the *Agricultural Statistics* would not be representative of the numbers of farmers in existence. The monthly publication of the National Farmers' Union, the *NFU Record*, revealed in June 1927 that farmers often owned or farmed more than one holding but these holdings would not generally have appeared as individual holdings in the *Agricultural Statistics*.¹²² Further evidence comes from the *Minutes of Evidence Taken before the Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge* (hereafter, *Tithe Commission*) in 1934 where one large-scale farmer, Mr. Ratcliff representing the NFU, stated that he farmed 'a collection of eleven farms in a block'.¹²³ In his statement to the *Tithe Commission*, Mr. George Bayliss of Wyfield Manor in Newbury claimed himself to be 'the largest tithepayer in South England also the largest arable farmer [sic]', farming a total of 13,000 acres made up by a number of farms.¹²⁴ Christopher Turnor, a large Lincolnshire landowner, had implied in his evidence to the Milner Committee in 1915 that it was not uncommon for a farmer to be farming two farms at once.¹²⁵ Thus, the 290,600 holdings in existence in 1941 were occupied by 277,000 separate occupiers, many of whom were not full-time or part-time farmers, according to the *National Farm Survey Report*, the difference between the two numbers being accounted

¹²² *NFU Record*, June 1927.

¹²³ Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge, *Minutes of Evidence*, p.122.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.636.

¹²⁵ NA/MAF/42/9.

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for by 10,000 occupiers who were responsible for more than one holding, their total number of occupancies totalling 23,600.¹²⁶

However, it is made clear in the *National Farm Survey Report* that where more than one holding was actually being farmed by the same occupier, these holdings had been regarded as a single holding for statistical presentation in both the *National Farm Survey Report* and the *Agricultural Statistics*:

Holdings which were under the same occupancy and day to day management and had a common source of labour, machinery and other permanent equipment were regarded as forming a single unit, and thus one survey record would be obtained, for example, for three such holdings of 4 acres, 16 acres and 30 acres, together making a 50-acre holding.¹²⁷

This method of recording of several holdings as one where they were being operated as one business and the relatively low level of single occupier multi-ownership of holdings – just over eight percent of holdings and 3.5 percent of occupiers in 1941¹²⁸ – means that the number of holdings shown to exist by the *Agricultural Statistics* throughout the interwar years would be a reasonable representation of the number of occupiers of agricultural holdings and will act as a good guide to identifying trends in numbers of farmers over the period. The Crop Reporters recording details for the *Agricultural Statistics* were slightly less assiduous in determining when holdings should be treated as a single business

¹²⁶ MAF, *National Farm Survey*, p.11.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p.7.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p.11.

than the Field Reporters whose data informed the *National Farm Survey Report*. The result is that around 10,000 more holdings were recorded by the Crop Reporters for the figures that would have formed the 1941 *Agricultural Statistics*, had they been published, than appeared in the 1941 *National Farm Survey Report*,¹²⁹ the three percent difference in the numbers of holdings being attributable to 'the greater tendency to amalgamate holdings under the Farm Survey'.¹³⁰ This suggests that a similarly low level of over-estimation of the number of existing holdings may have occurred in the *Agricultural Statistics* for the other years during the interwar period but, insofar as there can be assumed to have existed a consistent level of slight over-estimation, no effect will be had upon the trends in changes in numbers of holdings.¹³¹ Grigg has made a slightly ambiguous and unreferenced statement about the consistency of collection of the numbers of holdings in the *Agricultural Statistics* which suggests that consistent comparison can only be made from 1922 onwards¹³² but the actual figures from the *Agricultural Statistics* themselves indicate that earlier figures can be trusted since there appears to be no anomalous behaviour in the figures between 1921 and 1922; the information Grigg has used appears to be contained on page twelve of Part One of the *Agricultural Statistics* for 1922.¹³³

The consequence of the above exploration of the possibilities of using the data on the numbers of farms presented in the *Agricultural Statistics* for measuring change in farmer numbers is that, allowing for some low level of

¹²⁹ Ibid., p.7.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Grigg, 'Farm Size', p.183.

¹³³ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1922, Vol. 57*, p.12.

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inaccuracy in collection of data, some confidence can be assumed in using the numbers of farms shown to exist in the *Agricultural Statistics* from 1919 to 1939 as representative of genuine trends in changes in farm and, thus, farmer numbers over the interwar period.¹³⁴ It can be assumed that changes shown in the *Agricultural Statistics* over the interwar period will, indeed, be representative of trends in numbers of farmers, if not of precisely accurate numbers.

There are other advantages in using the data from the *Agricultural Statistics*. The first is that data is presented in detail and includes figures for numbers of holdings for individual counties so that regional changes in agricultural practice can be assessed whilst, also, some data is available for England alone, as well as for England and Wales in combination, an advantage insofar as this thesis is concerned with farming in England. The second is that the *Agricultural Statistics* differ from the *National Farm Survey Report* insofar as they also present statistics for agricultural holdings of one to five acres in size. These small farms were excluded from the *National Farm Survey Report* mainly on the grounds that they 'comprise less than one percent of the total area of crops and grass' although they numbered, in 1941, 70,000. Thus, whilst their productive capacity in relation to the war effort was regarded as being limited, they maintained or contributed to the livelihoods of a substantial number of people and, as this study has stated its commitment both to the study of people's relationships as they are involved in productive processes and to the conditions of small agriculturalists, changes in the numbers of these farms cannot be ignored. Clarity will be ensured, however, where reference to

¹³⁴ Ch.2 fn.13.

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statistics that either include or exclude farms of one to five acres is being made.

The definition of a farm or 'holding' of over five acres used in the *Agricultural Statistics* is identical to that of the *National Farm Survey Report*:

For the purposes of the survey it [a 'holding'] comprises any area of land of 5 acres and above used for the growing of crops (including grass), which is being farmed separately, that is to say as a self-contained unit.¹³⁵

The *National Farm Survey Report* states that holdings of over five acres in size existing in 1941 in England and Wales would virtually all have had some agricultural purpose and so it can be assumed that the same would be true for holdings of such size in the *Agricultural Statistics* which demonstrates further their utility in analysing the fortunes of farmers as measured by their occupation of holdings.¹³⁶

Data from the *Agricultural Statistics* confirms the impression given above that the interwar years saw falls in numbers of farmers as represented by the numbers of holdings of over five acres. The fall in numbers between 1919 and 1939 in England alone,¹³⁷ with which this study is primarily concerned, was of 33,008, from 283,063 to 250,055, a fall of almost 12 percent. The *Agricultural Statistics* show that farm numbers actually increased between 1919 and 1921 so that the fall from 1921 to 1939 in farms of over five acres was 35,355 or 12.5 percent. The fact that there were over 47,114 full-time farmers apparently disappearing between 1921 and 1941 according to the analysis of the *Census*

¹³⁵ MAF, *National Farm Survey*, p.7.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.7.

¹³⁷ These figures disregard Monmouth which was included in figures for England in the *Agricultural Statistics* only until 1922.

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and *National Farm Survey Report*, as noted above, a figure greater than that for the disappearance of holdings above five acres shown in the *Agricultural Statistics* is explicable. Firstly and obviously, the number of years between 1921 and 1941 is greater than 1921 to 1939, giving more time for farmer numbers to fall. Some disparities exist in measurement between the *Census* and the *National Farm Survey Report* which may mean that the figure of 47,114 that represents the disappearance of full-time farmers is slightly exaggerated, as has been discussed. It might also be suggested that some farmers, rather than disappearing from the statistics along with their holding were merely taking on much smaller holdings but this is not proved by the evidence. The years 1920 to 1939 witnessed a fall of 21 percent of holdings of less than five acres in size in England so for farmers to be entering onto farms in this size category from larger farms would have required farmers in this category to be leaving the industry or, less likely, to be trading up to larger farms.¹³⁸ It is more likely that there were farmers who farmed holdings of less than five acres but still considered themselves to be, first and foremost, farmers and were thus included in the appropriate category in the *Census* and, therefore, disappeared from that category if they ceased to farm. The inclusion of farms of one to five acres in size increases the figure for total numbers of farm disappearance between 1919 and 1939 to over 14 percent and, between 1921 and 1939, to 15 percent; holdings of less than five acres cannot be ignored altogether because, as well as many spare-time farms existing within this category, some full-time and part-

¹³⁸ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol. 54*, Table 10, pp.38-9; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1920, Vol. 55*, Table 12, pp.49-50; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1921, Vol. 56*, Table 10, pp.43-4; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol. 74*, Table 11, pp.38-9.

time intensive poultry-rearing and market gardening units would have made up its numbers and it is small farmers that are the main interest in this study.¹³⁹

A convincing explanation for the fall in holdings being lower than that of farmers, however, is that not all holdings would either disappear into dereliction and abandonment nor be swallowed up directly as part of another business if the original occupier had ceased to farm. As the *National Farm Survey Report* explains, some holdings were owned by one farmer but had no apparent occupant, being managed by another individual or firm independently but under the auspices of the owner.¹⁴⁰ Thus, if a vacant holding was bought up by a large firm or another farmer after the failure of its occupier, the former occupier may have disappeared from the statistics in the *Census* whilst the holding remained in operation and, despite being part of a larger business of farm ownership, the holding might be counted in the *Agricultural Statistics* separately from other holdings in that farm business.¹⁴¹ In such a case, the *Agricultural Statistics* would have continued to treat the farms as separate holdings that would be assumed to have an occupant. Thus, there would exist an increasing tendency for the statistics to underestimate the disappearance of farmers from agriculture as measured by the numbers of holdings in existence, this phenomenon of multiple holdings under single management being noted as one that was developing further after the Second World War.¹⁴² The *Agricultural Statistics* for

¹³⁹ MAF, *National Farm Survey*, p.8.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.7.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Ashton, J., and Cracknell, B.E., 'Agricultural Holdings and Farm Business Structure in England and Wales', *Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 14 4, (1961), 472-50, (pp.473-6); Britton, D.K., and Ingersent, K.A., 'Trends in Concentration in British Agriculture', *Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 16 1, (1964), 26-52, (p.33).

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1922 state explicitly that 'an appreciable number of owner-occupiers finding farming less profitable have retired from farming and have let their farms.' Some of these farms would have undoubtedly been managed in the way suggested above and this would have had the effect of increasing the underestimation of falls taking place in the numbers of farmers as judged by changes in farm numbers.¹⁴³

A more detailed analysis of the falls in numbers of holdings of varying sizes will be undertaken in later chapters in relation to those benefiting from interwar policy and legislation concerning agriculture. Most interestingly, this type of practice of amalgamation of farms under the auspices of a single business owner which was occurring in English agriculture, whether those farms were represented as one or more holdings in the *Agricultural Statistics*, can be seen as representative of the tendency towards centralization and concentration of capital that Marx depicted as the inevitable result of the process of capital accumulation in advanced capitalist economies.¹⁴⁴ It is certainly the case that the falls in numbers of farm holdings shown in the *Agricultural Statistics* are consistent with Marx's theory since the output in the agricultural sector, which it has been shown grew by 27 percent over the interwar period,¹⁴⁵ would be assumed to have generated profits that were being shared amongst fewer producers than formerly. The theories of centralization and concentration will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters.

¹⁴³ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1922, Vol. 57*, p.12.

¹⁴⁴ Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, pp.762-870.

¹⁴⁵ Brassley, 'British Farming', p.193.

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The most convincing argument for the fall in farm numbers being less than the fall in farmers is that the figures calculated from the *Agricultural Statistics* for 1919 and 1939 on the disappearance of farms, though striking, are an underestimate. They do not reveal the true extent of the disappearance of farms because the difference between the 1919 and 1939 figures only represents the net decrease in the number of farms. Any examination of the change in numbers in the existence of a particular group of social subjects only at the start and end points of any time period fails to recognise that some replenishment of the population under scrutiny might occur across the duration of the period as some subjects disappear from the group; for example, a regiment might be at the same strength in numbers at the end of a war as a result of recruiting soldiers to replace those killed in the campaigns during that war, but this will not mean that those soldiers killed did not die and that their deaths should not be counted amongst the total numbers of casualties. An estimate, constructed from figures given by Smith for the years 1919 to 1926 and 1932 to 1937 and by Lord Ernle for 1927 to 1931, indicates that 19,624 publicly funded small farms of under 50 acres individually in extent, known as 'smallholdings' were created in England and Wales over the interwar period with, using estimates for 1932, about ten percent of them in Wales.¹⁴⁶ English smallholdings numbered, therefore, at around 17,500 but these were not created all at the same time. Smallholdings were being created incrementally with, for example, 3,485 created in 1919, 7,089 in 1920, 4,445 in 1921 and 1,681 in

¹⁴⁶ Smith, N.R, *Land*, pp.235-6; Lord Ernle, p.426.

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1922¹⁴⁷ and thus were adding to the total number of farms in existence at the same time as this total was being reduced by the disappearance of farms; therefore, there came into existence over the interwar period at least 17,500 farms more than were shown to be in existence in 1919, not counting any other farms that might have been created without the assistance of the State. The figure of 17,500 that represents the number of smallholdings created should be added to the total number of farms in existence in 1919 as shown by the *Agricultural Statistics* if the gross number of farms that disappeared between that date and 1939 is to be calculated accurately.

The number total representing the farms that existed between the two World Wars that should be used to calculate the change in total farm numbers up to 1939 is 370,933 which takes into account the 17,500 smallholdings brought into being in the period, as opposed merely to the 353,433 that represents the 1919 figure for numbers of farms of an acre and above in existence. Subtracting 303,639, which is the number of farms in existence in 1939, increases the numbers of farms that disappeared across the interwar period in England to 67,924, making the gross failure rate of all farms just over 18 percent. The 18 percent figure for falls in farm numbers more closely resembles the fall of almost one in five farmers that was estimated from the *Census* and *National Farm Survey*.

¹⁴⁷ Smith, N.R., *Land*, p.234.



Further credence is given to the suggestion that falls in numbers of agricultural holdings over time are indicative of falls in numbers of farmers which, in turn, suggests that difficulties were being experienced by some of those farmers in English agriculture during the interwar period, by data that shows a substantial reduction in the acreage of land under crops and grass from 1919 to 1939. The reduction in England was from 24,069,298 acres to 21,946,501, a fall of 2,122,797 acres or almost 9 percent.¹⁴⁹ This 9 percent fall is smaller than the net reduction of over 14 percent in holdings of all sizes which the *Agricultural Statistics* suggest took place over the same period and, thus, indicates that the average size of farms increased. The increase indicated by the *Agricultural Statistics*, which does not take account of the amount of rough grazing on farms, was of over 5 acres or 7.5 percent, from 67 to 72.3 acres.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Figure for total holdings for 1919 is made up of total holdings shown in *Agricultural Statistics* for 1919 plus total nos. of smallholdings created between 1919 and 1939 in order that all holdings that are known to have come into existence during the interwar period, at least through Government schemes, can be represented. Figure for total holdings for 1939 is from *Agricultural Statistics* and includes total smallholdings extant in 1939. Figures do not include data for Monmouth. MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Table 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Table 11 (pp.38-9); Smith, N.R., *Land*, p.234.

¹⁴⁹ Figure 6.1 and Ch.6 fn.21.

¹⁵⁰ Table 3.2 including *Note and Sources.

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Whilst this actually underestimates the average size of holdings, especially in the latter year, because permanent grazing land was being classified increasingly but erroneously as rough grazing,¹⁵¹ it testifies to the process of a gradual concentration of agricultural capital in the form of land in the hands of fewer farmers. Concentration of capital in agriculture itself would be underestimated for the time by some holdings contributing to the total numbers in the *Agricultural Statistics* despite having no occupant and being part of another farming capital, as indicated above.

The east of England is known for its farms of above average size¹⁵² and as being particularly hard hit by difficult economic conditions in the interwar years.¹⁵³ This suggests that the relative sizes of farming operation may have been a factor in the experience of difficulties by farmers. The intuitive response would be that, if depression was concentrated in the east, large-scale farms must have suffered most; however, this has been shown not to be the case across the country as a whole. Whether it was the case that large-scale farms suffered more than small in the arable farming of the east of England and that elsewhere this pattern is reversed must be looked at and so an examination of patterns of regional farm disappearance needs to be undertaken, a task for the next chapter. The alternative suggestion is that large-scale farmers may have been instrumental in the construction of the discourse of distress in agriculture and that such a representation was made on the basis of the adverse effects of economic circumstances of small-scale farmers but was presented as an

¹⁵¹ Grigg, 'Farm Size', p.182.

¹⁵² Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, p.5; Caird, p.ii.

¹⁵³ Howkins, 'Death and Rebirth?', p.11; Brown, *Agriculture*, p.76.

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industry-wide phenomena in order that pressure would build for legislation that would benefit large-scale farmers. It may have been true that large-scale farmers did, indeed, suffer during the 1920s and then recovered in the 1930s and that this can be elucidated by the statistics. Patterns of disappearance of small-scale farms may also fluctuate over the whole of the interwar period. Therefore, there is considerable justification for a chronological examination of developments in farm disappearance and size to accompany the regional comparisons in the next chapter.

Conclusion

The argument has been made in Chapter One and continued in this chapter that the relative success and failure of farming can be measured by the trends in numbers of farmers in the industry.¹⁵⁴ These trends first needed to be identified. Establishing the trends in farmer numbers in England for the years from 1919 to 1941 has been undertaken here and was necessary because it has never been done as a scientific exercise before, largely because of the perceived lack of *Census* data for 1941.

The most important immediate result of the investigations undertaken in this chapter is to show that a general trend existed for the numbers of farmers and farms in England to fall overall across the interwar period. Inconsistencies in the available data have made exact calculation of the size of the fall difficult but it has been demonstrated that the fall in numbers of farmers was likely to

¹⁵⁴ Chapter 1, above.

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have been in excess of the falls in the numbers and percentages of farms of over five acres shown to have occurred across the period by the *Agricultural Statistics*. Thus, it is apparent that almost twelve percent of the farms that were most likely to be full-time farms disappeared from the statistics between 1919 and 1939 and that the fall between 1921 and 1941 in the numbers of full-time farmers may well have been as high as 47,000, or 18 percent. If numbers of farms of under five acres, farmed predominantly but not exclusively on a part-time basis, were to be included, these percentages of farm and farmer disappearance would be higher showing falls of fifteen percent between 1921 and 1939. Most striking of all is the figure for farm disappearance of almost one in five of all farms in existence at some point between the Wars that takes into account the creation of smallholdings by the State; even this figure may be an underestimate.

Recent and timely reassessment of the economic performance of interwar agriculture by historians has suggested that farmers and their supporters may have exaggerated the extent of economic depression in interwar agriculture. Even the existence of the limited economic success that has been suggested took place in farming in interwar England that has been recounted in Chapter One must cast doubt upon the veracity of the 'discourse of distress' in the industry that has been, until recently, reproduced so consistently in the historiography, but figures on the disappearance of farmers cast doubt upon the extent to which the farming community experienced success as a whole.

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The figures presented here on disappearance of farmers from the statistics may not contradict the brighter re-evaluation of the economic performance of the industry as a whole but they can certainly be taken as showing the existence of some detrimental social effects of the economic conditions in interwar agriculture. Whether distress was exaggerated or not, evidence on the numbers of farms and farmers has shown that there can be little doubt that distress was experienced. Falls in numbers involved in farming can be treated with added significance as a measure of distress because of the factors of 'independence' so beloved of petty bourgeois business owners and especially farmers but even more so because of the 'love of the land' that is so often professed by farmers and on their behalf; ¹⁵⁵ in this vein, Burchardt states, 'It can hardly be questioned that farming holds the potential for an unusually integrated, satisfying and deeply rooted way of life.'¹⁵⁶

The interwar period in agriculture has been characterised latterly as one in which economic growth is apparent over the period as a whole. Economic logic suggests that the increasing gross output and improving productivity of agriculture, on the one hand, and falling numbers of farmers, on the other, indicate that at least some of those surviving farmers, farming during a period of farm-size increase,¹⁵⁷ would have been increasing their profits. The period has also been characterised as one of falling prices in general and of depressions occurring from 1922 to 1925 and 1929 to 1932 around which the said economic

¹⁵⁵ Bechhofer, F., and Elliot, B., 'The Voice of Small Business and the Politics of Survival', *Sociological Review*, 26 1, (1978), 57-88, (p.77); Newby et al., *Property*, pp.153-4.

¹⁵⁶ Burchardt, 'Introduction: Farming and the Countryside', p.10.

¹⁵⁷ Table 3.2.

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growth is apparent. It is more than possible, as statistics on falling numbers have indicated, that farms could have been failing during or as a result of periods of depression.

It is hypothesised that the discourse of distress in farming emphasised conditions of depression to which Governments responded with legislation that was beneficial to larger-scale farmers and not those of lesser size. It is the task of the following chapter to show that it was, indeed, the case that groups of farmers with certain common circumstances relating to the size of their holdings rather than their location or production type suffered most as measured by falls in numbers of farms. The hypothesis is that many small farm businesses struggle at very low income levels and will, eventually and inevitably, fail, even if not in the period under direct examination, especially given the tendency for farm commodity prices to fall and concentration to occur in agriculture.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ Sampson, A., *The New Anatomy of Britain* (London: Book Club Associates, 1971), p.557; Marx, *Capital: Vol. 1*, pp.762-870.

Chapter 3: Farm Size as the Explanation of the Existence of Contrasting Narratives in Interwar English Agricultural History

Introduction

Studies undertaken since the Second World War have drawn one of two contrasting conclusions as to the performance of agriculture during the interwar period. Conspicuous revisionism in twenty-first century works by Brassley, Howkins and Martin views the economic performance of agriculture in a way which conflicts with earlier versions which maintain that adverse conditions were experienced by farmers amidst a failing agriculture.¹ Chapter One of this study has highlighted Brassley's reappraisal which shows the output of agriculture to have increased over the interwar period leading to the suggestion that the industry was moderately successful between the Wars.² Brassley's upbeat assessment of agriculture is supported by consideration in accompanying and subsequent studies of some unexplored social and cultural aspects of the countryside which have been found to have shown some vitality at the time.³ The economic, social and cultural revisionism presents a united front against the impression of a depressed interwar agriculture created between the Second World War and the final years of the twentieth century. This earlier impression,

¹ Chapter 1, above; Martin, *Development*, pp.6, 8-35.

² Brassley, 'British Farming', p.245.

³ Burchardt, J., 'State and Society in the English Countryside: the Rural Community Movement 1918-39', *Rural History*, 23 1 (2012), 81-106; Burchardt, J., 'Rethinking the Rural Idyll. The English Rural Community Movement 1913-26', *Cultural and Social History*, 8 1, (2011), 73-94; Burchardt, J., 'Rurality, Modernity and National Identity between the Wars', *Rural History*, 21 2, (2010), 143-50; Howkins, 'Death and Rebirth?', pp.16-25; Burchardt, J., "'New Rural Civilization'", pp.34-5; Thompson, L., 'Agricultural Education in the Interwar Years', in *The English Countryside between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?*, ed. by Brassley, P., Burchardt, J., and Thompson, L. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), pp.53-72, (p.72); Jeremiah, pp.116-31; Wallis, pp.102-115; Howkins, *Death of Rural England*.

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reviewed above in Chapter One, had been created using selective contemporary evaluations of the operating conditions of farmers and suggested that English agriculture was in decline between the Wars.⁴ It was reinforced by interwar commentary on the state of both the society and landscape of rural England that emphasised deterioration and is an impression that still gains qualified support.⁵

One major achievement of this study, so far, has been to show that an analytical process exists by which either of two versions of the condition of the interwar English countryside and its agriculture can be made to appear tenable, depending on which particular elements of existing evidence are given emphasis. Previously unexamined contemporary interwar sources have been presented in Chapter One alongside some subtle reinterpretation of existing studies, both of which simply give added veracity to the two versions of the conditions in interwar agriculture and the countryside - one of failure, the other of success - that have been presented in the historiography.⁶

Importantly, it appears that, in the existing historiography, whichever of the two conclusions has been reached as to the economic condition of interwar agriculture, it must be applied to the industry as a whole and, by implication, to all farmers. However, the argument will be made in this chapter that neither of the positions maintained in the historiography is entirely accurate and that both

⁴ Chapter 1, above.

⁵ Tranter, R.B., 'Agricultural Adjustment on the Berkshire Downs during the Recession of 1921-38', *Agricultural History Review*, 60 2, (2012), 214-40, (p.227); Short, B., 'The Social Impact of State Control in Agriculture in Britain, 1939-1955', in *War, Agriculture and Food: Rural Europe from the 1930s to the 1950s*, ed. by Brassley, P., Segers, Y., and Van Molle, L. (London: Routledge, 2012), pp.172-92, (p.172); Martin, 'Structural Transformation', p.17; Short et al., "'Front Line'", p.4.

⁶ Chapter 1, above.

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suffer from a failure to correctly distinguish between significant groups of farmers which experienced contrasting economic fortunes. There exists an apparent desire to brand the entirety of interwar English agriculture as either a success or a failure, as described in Chapter One. This desire extends to farmers who are represented as a cohesive social and economic group and has resulted in a misunderstanding of the actual situation. It appears that the possibility within agriculture of relatively extensive failure coexisting with some success has not been considered. It may simply be the case that there existed a range of experiences amongst farmers beyond either the failure that the twentieth century historiography⁷ and some recent studies⁸ have concluded had enveloped interwar agriculture or the success that more recent studies have espoused.⁹ Thus, it is hypothesised that failure was, indeed, applicable to some, but not all, farmers, as demonstrated by falls in farm numbers, whilst others experienced difficulties but survived in business and others were successful. Scope for recognition of mixed fortunes in interwar agriculture does actually exist in the historiography because recognition has been made within the contexts of both agricultural success and failure that arable farmers fared less well than pastoral ones.¹⁰ However, success and failure are not seen in existing narratives to have coincided. Thus, the twentieth century historiography recognised only distress in interwar agriculture with arable farmers suffering most badly whilst more recent studies see increased output in the agricultural sector as indicating some degree of prosperity, with dairy production representing the most profitable branch of

⁷ Chapter 1, above.

⁸ Tranter, p.227; Short, 'Social Impact', p.172; Short et al., "'Front Line'", p.4.

⁹ Chapter 1, above.

¹⁰ Chapter 1, above; Martin, *Development*, pp.12-15.

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farming. The presentation of such contrasts across the historiography as a whole suggests that further exploration of interwar farming is necessary, especially if any kind of logical reconciliation of the two versions is to be achieved.

More detailed analysis of statistical data may help to identify groups of agricultural producers that were more likely to experience either success or failure. One option would be to examine in more detail the relative fortunes of farmers in arable and dairy farming; however, a more promising alternative exists. Since study of these major farming types has permitted conclusions to have been drawn which support narratives, confusingly, both of success and of failure in interwar agriculture, added insight into interwar farming conditions appears necessary and this will be gained from addressing another structural feature of agriculture: farm size. Newby et al. and Bell and Newby, in their examinations of small and large scale farmers, raised the possibility some time ago of the existence of differing levels of influence of certain structural factors, such as farm size, upon farm operations.¹¹ It can be inferred that such an analysis of farm size can be applied to historical data and is an analysis that is sorely needed, as a description of the existing work on the history of farm size in England will demonstrate.

Historians of agriculture, in general, have failed to recognise the possibility that farm size may well have been a significant influence upon farmers' success or failure between the Wars and have either included the period

¹¹ Newby et al., 'Farming for Survival' pp.38-70; Bell and Newby, pp.86-107.

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in long term studies of trends in farm size¹² or have made only passing reference to it in a narrative dedicated to other aspects of interwar agriculture.¹³ However, it is well established in the historiography and contemporary interwar sources that arable agriculture has tended, in general, to be practised on larger farms than has pastoral farming.¹⁴ Thus, the tendency in the historiography, which is to claim that arable farms suffered either greater hardship or, more recently, less success than dairy farms, leads to the expectation that an examination of farms in different size categories would find that a higher proportion of the larger farms in existence disappeared than smaller ones. This is borne in mind, below, where the shortcomings in examination of the fortunes of farms of differing sizes by historians are examined so that rectification can begin. The result is that identification is made in terms of farm size of particular groups of both failing and achieving farmers. It will then become apparent that the failing and successful farmers form groups broadly identifiable by farm size. The experiences of one or other of these contrasting farm size groups may, it appears, have been used in the historiography to represent English agriculture in the interwar period in such a way that, formerly, it was seen as having been in distress and, subsequently, as a success; however, no reference has been made in that historiography to the use of the particular size group as the one being employed at any particular time to represent all farmers and the entirety of agriculture. It appears, in actuality, that it has never been recognised by historians that it was such farm size groups that they were utilising as their

¹² Grigg, 'Farm Size', pp.179-89.

¹³ Tranter, p.227.

¹⁴ Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, p.5; Whetham, *Agrarian History*, p.44; Venn, J.A., *Foundations of Agricultural Economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923), pp.60-1.

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examples; this resulted from the restricted nature of the sources they were employing and this and its causes will be explored in this and in subsequent chapters.

Farm Size, Farming Types and the 'Discourse of Distress'

The following passage will show that the two versions that have been proposed in the historiography of the condition of interwar agriculture have taken the same approach in their examinations by looking at two broad farming types: arable and pastoral. Thus, it might be assumed that they ought to have come to a similar conclusion. However, the contrasting conclusions that have resulted and which exist in the historiography as to the conditions in agriculture in interwar rural England give rise to the contention that there has been a degree of selectivity or partiality during interpretation, as will become clear. There has existed an over-zealous tendency to focus upon conditions in only one or other of the two farming types and to base conclusions for the industry as a whole upon those particular conditions.

The two opposing conclusions on the state of interwar English agriculture are in effect in accord about which group of farmers fared better and which worse, but their conclusions as to the overall condition of agriculture at the time are at variance, the one espousing overall success for the industry as a whole based on the conditions considered to be prevailing in the dairy branch of

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pastoral farming,¹⁵ and the other decline, based on arable conditions.¹⁶ The possibility arises that existing evidence has been misinterpreted by the adherents of one or both of the two versions of interwar agricultural conditions as a result of the approach taken to date and that there existed both success and failure in farming. Success or failure may have been more likely depending upon which of the two types of farming was being practised but it must be assumed that there existed a degree of adaptability between the two types. An alternative approach to interwar agriculture starts to look appropriate which examines more the degrees of adaptability of identifiable groups of farmers within the broad types that might have allowed some groups to survive and prosper and others to experience distress or failure. The qualities defining such groups will be identified below and Chapter Four will explore the factors influencing the degrees of adaptability which contributed to each group's particular experiences of prosperity or distress.

The argument for the existence of agricultural distress between the Wars, which retained credibility until the twenty-first century and still has adherents,¹⁷ was premised on contemporary interwar commentary which emphasised the existence of distress amongst arable farmers. Sources are available which confirm the existence of a perception of difficulties within arable farming areas at times during the 1920s. An internal Ministry of Agriculture letter of August 1921 from Sir Thomas Middleton to Sir Francis Floud highlights a growing feeling of

¹⁵ Brassley, 'British Farming', pp.194-5; Howkins, 'Death and Rebirth?', p.13; Martin, *Development*, pp.12-13.

¹⁶ Newby, *Country Life*, p.106; Brown, *Agriculture*, pp.76-95; Whetham, *Agrarian History*, p.142; Murray, 1955.

¹⁷ Tranter, pp.214-40.

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disquiet within the Ministry before the earlier of two periods of 'depression' identified by Douet and, later, by Howkins:¹⁸ 'And if many of the large corn growing farmers of the south and east are now in the plight which Falconer described, there will be a "depression" before the next harvest is ready.'¹⁹ The *Boston Guardian* was reporting the cancellation of various agriculturally associated events during the second period of stated depression in Lincoln-Holland, a county division with 78 percent of its cropland given over to arable in 1919.²⁰ In January 1931, the newspaper reported that the annual dinner of the Wainfleet and District Branch of the National Farmers' Union had been cancelled because the union had considered that, '[o]wing to the present state of agriculture, it is not a suitable time for festivities of this nature.'²¹ The number of regular agricultural shows that took place in Lincoln-Holland in the 1920s is remarkable and many small towns advertised their own but their relevance was beginning to be questioned by 1931, given that their role was traditionally as a promotion of the centrality of agriculture to a thriving countryside. The newspaper, having become the *Lincolnshire and Boston Guardian* on February 14 1931, was asking on March 28, 'Should Shows be postponed?', going on to mention one of the Lincoln-Holland villages specifically:

Tydd St. Giles Show... will not be held this year, the Committee having decided that it would be difficult to justify spending a large sum of money

¹⁸ Howkins, 'Death and Rebirth?', p.13.

¹⁹ NA/D/4/7, *Agricultural Credit Bank. Credit to Farmers, 1921-1922*.

²⁰ Table 5.8 and *Sources.

²¹ *Boston Guardian*, 3 January 1931.

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on promoting the show during the present period of agricultural depression.²²

Douet's 1989 study confirms that a widespread perception of depression existed between the Wars in another eastern county, Norfolk, where 75 percent of land had been given over to arable production in 1919.²³ Douet confirms that conditions appeared particularly bad during the period from 1929 to 1933 in which the newspaper extracts mentioned above demonstrating the existence of a similar perception in Lincoln Holland were published and that Norfolk had seen similarly hard times in the years between 1921 and 1923.²⁴ G.C.A. Robertson was writing of the intensively arable East Riding in the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* in 1928: 'Without doubt the farmers in this area have felt the recent depression acutely.'²⁵

Table 3.1 Acreage under Crops and Grass, Acreage of Arable Land, and Numbers of Dairy Cattle: England 1919-1939*			
	1919	1939	Change 1919-1939
Total Acreage under Crops and Grass	24069298	21946501	-2122797
Acreage Under Arable Cultivation	11412353	8396941	-3015412
Numbers of Dairy Cattle	1693808	1977224	283416

*Sources: MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Table 3 (pp.20-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Table 2 (pp.10-23).

²² *Lincolnshire and Boston Guardian*, 28 March 1931.

²³ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol. 54*, Table 3 (pp.20-9).

²⁴ Douet, A., 'Norfolk Agriculture, 1914-1972' (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of East Anglia, 1989), pp.113-5, 127-41.

²⁵ Robertson, G.C.A., 'Farming in Yorkshire', *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, 89, (1928), 50-67, (p.62).

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The argument for arable distress was supported by statistics on a decline in the acreage of farmland dedicated to growing arable crops over the duration of the interwar period. Murray's despondent 1955 account of the period pointed out that Great Britain had lost 4 million acres of crops 'other than grass' between 1918 and 1939²⁶ whilst the *Agricultural Statistics* show that England's arable area fell by over a quarter from 11,412,353 acres in 1919 to 8,396,941 in 1939, a fall of just over three million acres or more than a quarter of the acreage under arable crops.²⁷ Data from the *Agricultural Statistics*, *National Farm Survey* and the *Census* that show falls in farm and farmer numbers of, in some cases, more than 18 percent, presented in Chapter 2, add weight to the twentieth century historiographical accounts which have stressed the problems of farmers although, not in themselves, specifically of arable farmers.²⁸ However, other evidence also from statistics on changes in the agricultural workforce tends to support the notion of interwar difficulties amongst arable farmers. Arable farms required greater manpower for a given area than livestock farms and tended to be larger and thus to employ more labour;²⁹ figures from the Ministry of Agriculture's Special Committee on Agricultural Policy from 1930 show that arable farms of greater than 20 acres in extent required 3.5 times as many workers as similarly sized grassland farms.³⁰ George Edwards, the prominent supporter of agricultural labour and an MP for South Norfolk during the 1920s, reported on behalf of the TUC to the Ministers of Agriculture and Health that, by

²⁶ Murray, p.22.

²⁷ Table 3.1 including *Sources.

²⁸ Chapter 2, above; Figure 2.2.

²⁹ Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, p.5.

³⁰ NA/MAF/38/18.

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as early as 1926, arable farmers were cutting their labour requirements quite dramatically amidst the general malaise:

There is bad cultivation in many parts of Essex. There was more thistle and rubbish in certain named areas than there was barley and wheat. Many farms that used to employ ten men are now employing three and four.³¹

The reduction in the hired labour component of agriculture suggests that the economic conditions during the interwar years may well have affected arable farmers in particular. Numbers of regular agricultural labourers fell by over 31 per cent from 685,000 in 1921 to 471,000 in 1939 whilst numbers of casual workers were cut nearly in half, from 184,000 to 99,000.³²

A significant contrast is found between twenty-first century historical reappraisals of interwar agriculture and the earlier written histories. The twentieth century tale of a failing interwar English agriculture with its particularly unfortunate arable sector has been replaced in the twenty-first century by an estimation of general interwar agricultural prosperity based on increases in the total output of the industry over the interwar period.³³ The construction of this picture of prosperity, relative to the earlier versions, has emphasised the increased role of branches of husbandry in English farming other than arable, thereby tending to downplay, at least tacitly, the difficulties documented amongst arable farmers. Dairy farming has been seen as particularly important,

³¹ NA/MAF/48/206.

³² Armstrong, p.175.

³³ Brassley, 'British Farming', pp.192-4.

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Martin regarding it as the source of agricultural recovery in the 1930s and Howkins, as well as Brassley, seeing it as a central feature of the defence against the agricultural difficulties that they regard as having been previously overstated.

The focus on dairy farming was not, necessarily, new in the twenty-first century, however. Despite emphasising the existence of interwar distress, earlier versions had also suggested, however briefly, that dairy production and livestock farming might have offered better returns to farmers than concentration on arable crops.³⁴ Indeed, various accounts over the years have suggested that there existed geographical areas where dairy farmers witnessed at least some stability in the interwar years. Fletcher identified by as early as 1954 the existence of 'steadily profitable' dairy farming in East Lancashire, the key to which was a 'milk to feeding stuffs price ratio' whereby the price of milk was falling at a slower rate than that of the means of feeding milk cows.³⁵ Chapman's 1961 study of the North York Moors evinced signs of interwar stability in a switch by some farmers from traditional low density sheep farming and virtual subsistence agriculture to the production of fresh milk for retailing in Teeside, Whitby and Scarborough in a locality of otherwise unrewarding agriculture.³⁶ Taylor has located relative success for farmers up to 1930 in the production of fresh milk in various regions.³⁷ These accounts of relative security in regional dairy farming are, however, all set within narratives constructed in

³⁴ Newby, *Country Life*, p.106; Whetham, *Agrarian History*, p.142.

³⁵ Fletcher, 'Economic Development', p.277.

³⁶ Chapman, J., 'Changing Agriculture and the Moorland Edge in the North York Moors' (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of London, 1961).

³⁷ Taylor, D., 'Growth and Structural Change in the English Dairy Industry, c.1860-1930', *Agricultural History Review*, 35 1, (1987), 47-64.

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the twentieth century that emphasise the existence of interwar agricultural decline unlike the more recent version that stresses the major contribution of pastoral farming to an overall wellbeing in agriculture that is demonstrated by measures of increasing economic output.

The two major interpretations of the state of interwar English agriculture accept that difficult circumstances were faced by arable farmers relative to dairy ones even though they may disagree on the overall condition of farming at the time, one emphasising success and the other decline. The conclusion that arable farmers suffered distress was presented openly in the twentieth century historiography that represented interwar farming in England as having suffered from depression;³⁸ the twenty-first century revisionism that emphasises agricultural prosperity between the Wars has tacitly acknowledged difficulties amongst arable farmers both by avoiding extensive mention of them but at the same time emphasising that prosperity was to be found amongst pastoral farmers and, in particular, dairy farmers. However, the ascription in twenty-first century revisionism of success to the interwar agricultural sector would seem to be, at best, a little premature since it has been shown to require the ignorance of the disappearance of substantial numbers of members of the agricultural workforce. Ignorance is required, in this case, of falling numbers of farmers,³⁹ falls which are implicit in twentieth century written histories that emphasise the

³⁸ Perren, p.69; Brown, *Agriculture*, pp.76-95; Newby, *Country Life*, p.106.

³⁹ Chapter 2, above.

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experience of depression in farming as well as of falls in numbers of workers, which are explicit.⁴⁰

The failure of reasoning behind recent revisionism that ascribes success to interwar agriculture, following the earlier tendency in the historiography of applying its findings to farmers as a whole group, appears to be acute in the light of the substantive, new evidence on conditions in interwar agriculture revealed by falls in farmer and farm numbers in Chapter Two. Falls in numbers of farms and farmers suggest that there were in reality fairly widespread difficulties amongst farmers even though revisionism has identified increases in agricultural output in England between the Wars. Thus, there exists, as noted, a problem of definition;⁴¹ the increased output for agriculture as a whole⁴² could indeed be termed, in terms of pure economics, a 'success' but the decrease in the numbers of farmers contributing to the aggregate of production certainly indicates significant failure in human and social terms. Decreasing farmer numbers also indicates that some farmers were indeed relatively more successful than others since the receipts from the increased output would have been distributed amongst fewer producers than formerly. Furthermore, an assumption that input costs were falling at the same or a faster rate than produce prices, as occurred at least between 1927 and 1931,⁴³ would indicate increases in profit for those producers with high input costs but not necessarily

⁴⁰ Armstrong, p.175.

⁴¹ Chapter 2, above.

⁴² Brassley, 'Output', pp.60-84.

⁴³ Harkness, p.29.

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for all farmers; certainly, the falls in farm and farmer numbers indicate that financial benefits were not necessarily being shared equally across the industry.

The conclusions that either prosperity or distress affected interwar English agriculture as a whole that are narrated in the historiography to date have been exemplified by mysterious over generalization based upon the experiences of whichever particular broad farming type – arable or dairy - supports the particular conclusion desired by the authors concerned. The possibility that arises from examination of both these versions of interwar agricultural performance is that interwar farmers as individuals might have experienced economic conditions that differed from one to another and which ranged from success through survival to absolute failure; this has not thus far been recognised. This new possibility deserves exploration and perhaps a new approach that transcends the moribund method of analysing farming type. However, since it is the analysis of the two broad farming types together that has led to this possibility, it would seem that complete abandonment of analysis based on the two types might be untimely. The question remains as to the best method of analysis and of discovering the actual factors contributing to the circumstances of contrasting economic fortunes amongst farmers that have been outlined.

The Potential of Agricultural Statistics in the Identification of Contrasts of Fortune amongst Interwar Farmers

The only realistic conclusion that can be drawn from examination of both versions of the condition of interwar agriculture extant in the historiography is that arable farming offered, at best, even less chance of success than dairy farming. Any attempt to look for variations in farmers' fortunes through extending the argument for interwar distress premised on arable problems whilst also demonstrating success based on pastoral farming might reasonably attempt to supplement the existing statistics with a detailed breakdown by farming type of the data on farm and farmer disappearance. Previously analysed statistics show falls in the arable acreage that have long been used as a measure of interwar arable adversity⁴⁴ whilst increases in numbers of dairy cattle between 1924 and 1939 and in the use of pasture land⁴⁵ are used to demonstrate prosperity in livestock farming and, indeed, in agriculture as a whole. It might be expected that support for these conclusions would be likely to be found in the *Agricultural Statistics*. Obstacles exist, however, that appear to have discouraged historians from using the *Agricultural Statistics* as evidence of difficulties or success in any type of farming.

The data from the *Agricultural Statistics*, to which reference is made above, which show a fall in the acreage of farmland under arable crops in

⁴⁴ Hardy, D., and Ward, C., *Arcadia for All: the Legacy of a Makeshift Landscape*, (London: Mansell, 1984), p.21; Murray, p.22.

⁴⁵ Martin, *Development*, p.13.

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England of just over three million acres⁴⁶ would not in themselves prove the existence of difficulties amongst arable farmers, although they may be suggestive of them, because other reasons than simple arable adversity existed for changes in land use that might have reduced the area under arable crops in interwar England. Land was bought for development by builders⁴⁷ or, as shown by the debate in Parliament on the Housing (Rural Authorities) Bill in 1931, by the State for the construction of dwellings for rural workers⁴⁸ and for the creation of smallholdings.⁴⁹ Sales of farmland were not, therefore, necessarily the result of agricultural hardship and were not, thus, necessarily viewed by landowners as simply an alternative to accepting low rent returns on land let to hard-pressed farmers, arable or otherwise. Statistics showing reductions in arable acreages could equally be interpreted as revealing a willingness of agricultural landlords to cash in on high prices for land for redevelopment; the existence of an inflated land market is made clear in the *Papers Relating to the Agricultural Credits Bill, 1923* which indicate the existence of one particularly strong influence on land prices, stating that '[c]ompetition among purchasers was, moreover, increased in 1919 and 1920 by the entry into the market of the County Councils, who bought extensively for purposes of Land Settlement.'⁵⁰ Land sales cannot automatically be understood to be the result of farmers struggling to survive, especially, as has been documented, in the years 1918 to 1921 when land sales boomed at a time when farmers were actually enjoying a

⁴⁶ Table 3.1.

⁴⁷ Murray, p.22.

⁴⁸ NA/MAF/48/208, *Housing Bill and Act 1931*.

⁴⁹ NA/MAF/53/64.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

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period of post War prosperity and many were buying farms,⁵¹ such as those of Lord Leconfield in West Sussex.⁵² More significantly, decreases in arable land might be indicative merely of a move by farmers into more profitable circumstances in another branch of agriculture; it has been noted above, for example, that historians have for some time been suggesting better opportunities existed in livestock farming, especially in dairy production, between the Wars.⁵³ However, decreases in arable land need to be examined alongside changes in land use by other farming types; any decreases in pastoral land use alongside a falling arable area, for instance, might be suggestive of more general problems in agriculture.

A much more significant statistical pointer to arable farming problems than falls in the arable acreage alone would be any accompanying falls to be found in numbers of arable farmers together with declining farm numbers. The disappearance of arable farms, taken on its own, might not demonstrate absolutely that difficulties were being experienced by arable farmers, for the same reason identified above regarding falls in the acreage of arable land which is that arable farms might have been converted to dairying; however, their disappearance seen in the light of the falls in farmer numbers, detailed in Chapter Two, and in the arable acreage, noted above, would be of considerably greater import. It is important to reiterate here the assertion made in Chapter Two that falls in numbers of farmers should be seen as serious evidence of

⁵¹ Thompson, F.M.L., 'Land Market', pp.289-92.

⁵² Godfrey, J.D., 'The Ownership, Occupation and Use of Land on the South Downs between the Rivers Arun and Adur in West Sussex, c.1840-1940' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Sussex, 1999), p.413.

⁵³ This Chapter, above.

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difficulties in agriculture because of the deep desire of those involved in running farm businesses not to give up farming. The President of the Agricultural Economics Society, Joseph Duncan, made it obvious in 1940 just how tenacious was the desire of such people to cling to the way of life associated with occupation of agricultural holdings. Duncan made note of the tendency in Britain for new farmers to be sons of existing farmers rather than to emerge from groups whose proven management skills would be better suited to running farm businesses, referring to agriculture as 'practically a closed industry'.⁵⁴ Martin's work is consistent with the sentiments of Duncan, noting that farmers, during the 1930s, although in some cases farming part-time, were prepared to go to almost any lengths in order to remain as part of the agricultural industry.⁵⁵

Any attempt to reinforce the argument that contrasting fortunes affected farmers should take into account those claims by historians that contrasting conditions existed across the two broad farming types of pastoral and arable, since it is possible, in theory, that the conditions of the two types in relation to one another might be examined. Declining numbers of arable farms that reflect problems in interwar arable farming accompanied by increasing or steady numbers of pastoral farms might constitute evidence of more prosperous conditions in dairy and livestock farming relative to those of arable. Clearly, the number of pastoral farms could not be expected to have increased by as many as the total number of farms that disappeared, since it has already been established that overall farm numbers fell; however, it would be logical to

⁵⁴ Duncan, J.F., 'Personal Factors in British Agriculture', *Journal of the Proceedings of the Agricultural Economics Society*, 6 1, (1940), 21-38, (p.28).

⁵⁵ Martin, 'Structural Transformation', Exeter, p.23.

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assume that any increase in pastoral farms came at the expense of arable holdings suggesting that arable holdings would have to have decreased in greater number than overall falls in the number of farms.

The foregoing passage demonstrating the possible utility of examining changes in acreage and in numbers of farms and farmers in broad farming types to an exploration of agricultural conditions between the Wars makes it unfortunate, therefore, that there is no data on the particular specialities of production of individual farms in the *Agricultural Statistics*; nor is there any data on numbers of farmers in particular branches of production. However, the above peroration is not purely idealistic; an attempt to examine contrasting circumstances for interwar farmers is not rendered impossible. The absence of such conclusive data on individual farm specialities does, however, make an alternative approach to researching interwar conditions even more necessary than does the mere inconclusiveness shown to result from existing examination of broad farming types. That the suggestion that widely differing economic circumstances ranging from success to outright failure may have been experienced by farmers has not been made makes it unsurprising, therefore, that the search for factors - other than broad farming types - that might have been common to farmers in groups undergoing any particular experience, has not been pursued. One possible method of identifying factors common to farmers in groups undergoing any particular experience is to look at farm size in relation to the incidence of farm disappearance.

The Absence from the Historiography of the Decline of Small Farms in Interwar England

Little work has been carried out specifically upon changes in the size structure of farms in England in the interwar years. Grigg has examined farm size in England and Wales between the mid-nineteenth and the late twentieth centuries and concluded that it increased as farm numbers decreased but the extended time period of his analysis resulted in his overlooking those extensive falls in farm numbers between the Wars that contributed to the increases in the average farm size he notes took place from the 1920s onwards.⁵⁶ Tranter's recent passing reference to falls in numbers of small farms arises from the *Agricultural Statistics*,⁵⁷ a more detailed analysis of which, below, gives results that point to the existence of distinct contrasts in the fortunes of farmers depending upon the size of their farms.

The average size of interwar farms in England appears to be quite small in 1919 at 67 acres. An average of 67 acres is certainly small by modern standards; even in 1983, average farm size in England and Wales was 155 acres. This relatively low average size stemmed from the existence of a large number of farms among which a considerable majority were relatively small, being less than 50 acres in extent, and to which were referred at the time as 'small'. Interwar agricultural economists who were expert in the subject of farm size, including J.A. Venn, called farms of under 50 acres in extent 'small' farms or

⁵⁶ Grigg, 'Farm Size', pp.187-9.

⁵⁷ Tranter, p.227.

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Table 3.2 Average Farm Size in England and Selected Counties 1919-1939*						
	Average Size			Average Size Inc. Rough Grazing		
	<i>acres</i>			<i>acres</i>		
	1919	1939	Change 1919-1939	1919	1939	Change 1919-1939
England	67.0	72.3	5.3	75.2	84.8	9.6
East Suffolk	88.5	83.2	-5.3	91.0	89.2	-1.8
Essex	88.2	90.4	2.2	89.0	95.6	6.5
Gloucester	69.8	80.3	10.4	71.1	84.3	13.2
Hampshire	70.9	76.2	5.3	81.7	96.1	14.4
Huntingdon	84.5	100.0	15.5	84.9	103.4	18.5
Lancashire	42.4	41.2	-1.1	48.3	50.0	1.7
Leicester	68.6	83.1	14.5	68.7	83.7	15.0
Lincoln Holland	45.0	49.2	4.2	45.0	49.5	4.5
Norfolk	79.6	80.4	0.7	82.6	86.9	4.3
Warwick	70.7	80.8	10.1	71.2	83.0	11.8
West Suffolk	99.9	108.0	8.1	104.6	117.7	13.1
West Sussex	83.4	86.0	2.6	90.9	100.9	9.9
Westmorland	74.0	81.0	7.0	136.2	175.3	39.1
Yorkshire East Riding	95.1	106.1	11.0	95.9	108.6	12.7
Yorkshire North Riding	70.2	79.5	9.3	96.8	117.4	20.5
Yorkshire West Riding	47.8	53.8	6.0	58.1	71.7	13.6

*Note and Sources: Figures have been rounded to nearest tenth of an acre. MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Tables 3 (pp.20-9) and 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Tables 2 (pp.10-23) and 11 (pp.38-9).

'smallholdings'. The 50 acre upper limit for the 'small' farm was used for reasons associated mostly with the contrasting structures of the labour force between such farms and those of larger scale; a general rule of thumb was that farms of less than 50 acres in size could be classified truly as 'family' farms as they would

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not have required the hired labour component necessary on farms of a larger size, although there existed of course some variation across the variety of farming types.⁵⁸ Wynne makes it clear that, even by as late as 1944 to 1948 when wartime had forced advances in mechanization and concurrent reductions in labour requirements, the labour force necessary per 100 acres on a 100 acre arable farm averaged almost 6 persons, on 'intermediate type' farms, almost 5, and, on grassland types, the equivalent of 4.5.⁵⁹ Wynne's figures should be seen in the light of research that suggests that family farm labour is much less productive than paid labour, suggesting that small farms of under 50 acres would still have needed to utilise the labour of several family members.⁶⁰ Henderson's *Farming Ladder* shows that the amount of labour used in 1944 on an 84 acre mixed livestock farm where some arable crops were grown for feed was substantial, including 3 hired labourers, pupils from agricultural colleges and at least 4 family members.⁶¹

A total of 353,433 farm holdings of at least 1 acre in size was to be found in England in 1919, according to the *Agricultural Statistics*; of these farms, 71,119 were of between 1 and 5 acres in size, a further 93,799 were between 5 and 20 acres in size and another 63,865 were larger than 20 acres but smaller than 50 acres. There were, therefore, 228,783 holdings of less than 50 acres in extent in England; however, these figures are reconsidered below where it is

⁵⁸ Venn, J.A., *Foundations of Agricultural Economics (together with) an Economic History of British Agriculture during and after the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), p.107.

⁵⁹ Wynne, p.31.

⁶⁰ Gasson, R., and Errington, A., *The Farm Family Business* (Wallingford: CAB International, 1993), pp.125-31.

⁶¹ Henderson, *The Farming Ladder* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), pp.34, 111.

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calculated that they actually underestimate the number of small farms by about 7.5 percent meaning that small farms made up 66.5 percent of all farms existing in the interwar period and, thus, a large majority of the farms in existence. Contemporary commentators, such as Venn, Lord Addison, and Astor and Rowntree, were well aware of the existence of such a large number of small farms⁶² but it is a phenomenon that has attracted very little attention from historians although exceptions do exist, notably Thirsk⁶³ and some recent, brief references to the persistence of small farms into the twentieth century in works by Sayer, by Short and by Overton and Griffiths.⁶⁴

The existence of so many small farms makes it clear that they must have played a significant role in the development of agriculture in the interwar years and in the understanding, both contemporary and historical, of the condition of the industry during the period between the Wars. Thus, the possible role for the analysis of farm size in the debate on interwar agricultural conditions, including on conditions as determined by farming type, makes the failure of the historiography to address - or even to widely acknowledge - the large number of small farms in existence between the Wars somewhat surprising.

A general assumption exists in the historiography of rural England about the historical development of the structure of the agricultural industry that sees

⁶² Venn, J.A., 1933, *Foundations (together with) Economic History*, p.107; Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p.330; Lord Addison, p.42.

⁶³ Thirsk, *Alternative Agriculture*.

⁶⁴ Sayer, K., "His footmarks on Her Shoulders": the Place of Women within Poultry Keeping in the British countryside, c.1880 to c.1980', *Agricultural History Review*, 61 2, (2013), 301-29; Short, 'Social Impact', p.177; Griffiths, E., and Overton, M., *Farming to Halves: the Hidden History of Sharefarming in England from Medieval to Modern Times* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp.156-79.

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large farms as being the norm since Victorian times. Distinction is rarely made in studies of interwar agriculture between farms of contrasting sizes; agriculture has been represented in most studies undertaken since the Second

Table 3.3 Numbers of Farms in Large and Small Size Categories in England 1919-1939*							
	Number of Holdings						
	Year	1919	1931	Change 1919-1931	1939	Change 1931- 1939	Change 1919-1939
<i>Farm Size</i>							
1-5 acres		71119	62615	-8504	53584	-9031	-17535
5-20 acres		93799	83749	-10050	71561	-12188	-22238
20-50 acres		63865	62929	-936	57909	-5020	-5956
1-50 acres		228783	209293	-19490	183054	-26239	-45729
50 acres and above		124650	122238	-2412	120585	-1653	-4065
All Farms		353433	331531	-21902	303639	-27892	-49794

* Sources: MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Table 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1931, Vol.66*, Table 8 (pp.64-5); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Table 11 (pp.38-9).

World War as an industry of large farms owned by large landowners who rented them to farmers who hired labourers to work them. The tripartite structure of English agriculture was deemed to have been firmly in place by the time of the 'Great Depression' that began in the 1870s and little mention is made of any change in the twentieth century; for example, C.S. Orwin's 1949 *A History of English Farming*, by referring to English agriculture as 'an industry of little capitalists' and citing only the operations of individual farm businesses that had been large-scale operations,⁶⁵ elided the fact that farms of less than fifty acres had still been in existence in large numbers in the interwar period and beyond. Murray's 1955 highlighting of the increases in farmers' wartime output which

⁶⁵ Orwin, *English Farming*, pp.111-6.

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was suggestive of great industrialised organization amongst farmers⁶⁶ has been examined in the twenty-first century. Brassley, Martin, and Short et al., have all recognised how the promotion by wartime officials of mechanization for arable farming implied the existence of an efficient, industrialised industry but do not mention that such farming could only have been undertaken economically on large farms and pay no attention to the ramifications of mechanization for small-scale farms.⁶⁷ In 1974, Whetham established the final removal in 1921 of First World War subsidies to cereal growers as the premier political event in farming in the twentieth century; by naming this act the 'Great Betrayal' and making no distinction between which farmers it particularly affected, Whetham effectively created the notion that the interests of all interwar farmers had been directly connected to cereal growing which, in reality, was mainly undertaken by large-scale farmers.⁶⁸ A resulting issue, addressed by Penning-Rowsell and Cooper, regarding farmers' antipathy towards agricultural labour paid no attention to small farmers since they hired few workers and were thus irrelevant, whilst Moore's response was merely to highlight the political influence of cereal farmers without reference to the size of the pastoral farms that he argued were the real victims of 'betrayal' at the time, many of which were small.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Murray, p.15.

⁶⁷ Short et al., "'Front Line of Freedom'", p.9; Martin, 'Structural Transformation', p.33; Brassley, P., 'Wartime Production and Innovation 1939-45', in *The Front Line of Freedom: British Farming in the Second World War*, ed. by Short, B., Watkins, C., and Martin, J. (Exeter: British Agricultural History Society, 2006b), pp.36-54, (p.37).

⁶⁸ Whetham, "'Great Betrayal'", 36-49.

⁶⁹ Penning-Rowsell, pp.176-94; Moore, S., 'The Real "Great Betrayal"? Britain and the Canadian Cattle Crisis of 1922', *Agricultural History Review*, 41 2, (1993), 155-68; Cooper, 'Another Look', pp.81-104.

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Distinction by farm size is rarely made in reference to English farmers of the interwar period. It seems, given the absence of differentiation in the historical literature, that all farmers were assumed to have been indeterminate from one another in the twentieth century. Whitby's 1961 analysis concentrated on the ages of farmers whilst Holderness's 1989 single chapter study identified farmers only as full-time or part-time and even this distinction was not applied to the interwar period.⁷⁰ Self and Storing in 1962 mentioned the 'great diversity of farming systems' but stated that 'concepts of the "average" farm and the "average" farmer have very little meaning' resulting paradoxically in their failing to differentiate in any way between farmers.⁷¹ Critical political analysis of the history of farming emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s⁷² recognising the developing interwar political desire for corporate agriculture and the rise of the NFU as the single representative of farmers without identifying the contemporary effects upon - or existence of - small farms. Griffiths has made passing reference to the recognition by some interwar farmers of their interests being at odds with those of larger farmers but has not pursued the theme and has accurately parodied reality in representing farmers as a single body in her study of the representations and realities of farmers in society and culture.⁷³

The accepted wisdom has been either that small farms had been finally eliminated during the enclosures accompanying the industrial revolution, as depicted in the early twentieth century by the Hammonds, Johnson, Gray, and

⁷⁰ Whitby, pp.83-94; Holderness, 'Farmers', pp.101-14.

⁷¹ Self and Storing, pp.30-4.

⁷² Smith, M.J., *Agricultural Support*, pp.57-86; Winter, pp.71-99; Cox et al., pp.30-47; Cooper, *Conservative Politics*, pp.160-83.

⁷³ Griffiths, 'Heroes', pp.209-29; Griffiths, *Labour*, p.285.

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Bourne⁷⁴ or, somewhat in contradiction of available statistical evidence, that they had been virtually extinct well before that time;⁷⁵ Orwin had written in 1930 of 'systems and practices which were discarded generations ago by rural England'.⁷⁶ The assumption had even been made that small farms, populated by peasants, had disappeared by the fourteenth century, one that M.M. Postan attributes to the bourgeois study of medieval history.⁷⁷ Macfarlane persisted in 1979 in this bourgeois vein in his highly selective use of evidence to support the argument that a peasantry has never existed in Britain.⁷⁸

One possible explanation for the concentration on farming as an operation undertaken on a large scale is that Fordist⁷⁹ tendencies extended from western society at large⁸⁰ into the study of British economic and social history until the late 1970s.⁸¹ These tendencies led to the agricultural revolution being seen as the catalyst for the industrial revolution, placing it at the heart of historical study of the English countryside, resulting in an image of a unitary agriculture that was at an advanced stage of capitalist development by the nineteenth century.⁸² Such overall advancement was not considered consistent with the idea of the

⁷⁴ Gintner, D. E., 'Measuring the Decline of the Small Landowner', in *Land, Labour and Agriculture: Essays for Gordon Mingay*, ed. by Holderness, B. A., and Turner, M. (London: The Hambledon Press, 1991), pp.27-48, (p.27).

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.47.

⁷⁶ Orwin, C.S., *The Future of Farming* (London: Oxford Clarendon Press, London, 1930), p.85.

⁷⁷ Beckett, J. V., 'The Peasant in England: a Case of Terminological Confusion?', *Agricultural History Review*, 32 2, (1984), 113-23.

⁷⁸ Macfarlane, A., *The Origins of English Individualism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

⁷⁹ Gramsci, A., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971; repr. 2007), p.279.

⁸⁰ Harvey, D., *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011; 1st published 2005), pp.11-12; Savage, M., and Warde, A., *Urban Sociology, Capitalism and Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), p.58.

⁸¹ Hobsbawm, E. J., 'The Making of the Working Class, 1870-1914', in *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion and Jazz*, ed. by E.J. Hobsbawm (London: Abacus, 1999), pp.76-99, (pp.77-8).

⁸² Burchardt, 'Agricultural History', p.471.

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existence of numerous small farms which tended to be associated with the 'backward' agriculture of peasant societies, although the survival of farms corresponding to the peasant model in England in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did enjoy a brief popularity in the 1980s.⁸³ This Fordist perspective extended, with notable exceptions, to agricultural labour history into the 1990s and, in combination with contemporary political exigencies, can be argued to have contributed largely to creating an understanding of interwar agriculture as an industry conducted by large scale businesses.⁸⁴ Labour history tended to concentrate on relationships between employer farmers and employee labourers from the nineteenth century onwards which by nature excluded twentieth century small farms of under 50 acres that hired little or no full-time labour.⁸⁵

Such writing has been guided by earlier work such as by Venn in 1923 who, despite acknowledging the existence of smallholdings and small farms, largely dismissed any importance they may have had, writing that the 'small man and the farm worker lost their direct interest in the land' in the decades of enclosures following the Napoleonic Wars.⁸⁶ Lord Addison had served from 1930 to 1931 as Minister of Agriculture in Macdonald's Labour Government and, despite being well aware of small farm survival, wrote in similar vein in 1939,

⁸³ Howkins, 'Peasants, Servants and Labourers', pp.49-62; Reed, M., "'Gnawing it out': a New Look at Economic Relations in Nineteenth Century Rural England", *Rural History*, 1 1, (1990), pp.83-94; Reed, M., 'Nineteenth Century Rural England: a Case for Peasant Studies?', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 14 1, (1986), 78-99; Donajgrodzki, pp.425-42; Reed, M., 'The Peasantry of Nineteenth Century Rural England: a Neglected Class?', *History Workshop Journal*, 18 1, (1984), 53-76.

⁸⁴ Armstrong; Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men*.

⁸⁵ Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men*; Groves.

⁸⁶ Venn, 1923, *Foundations*, p.76.

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'The extensive expropriations of land that accompanied the Enclosure Acts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in England destroyed a splendid and independent peasantry.'⁸⁷ These writers were guided by trends towards the concentration and centralization in agriculture that would result logically in farm amalgamation and expansion, as mentioned in Chapter Two.⁸⁸

Consequently, there seems to have appeared little point in studying the possibility of the continued existence of small farms. Even where the structure of interwar farm tenure has been studied, to which work on farm size might well have contributed, it has been with regard to farm sales from landed estates that increased occupying ownership by farmers from about 11 percent to 37.5 percent between 1918 and 1927.⁸⁹ Inadequacies in the statistical data have contributed to diverting the debate amongst historians from structural aspects of farm tenure to concentrate on the extent and timing of the sales of landed estates that took place between the late nineteenth century and the 1920s, leaving little or nothing said about farm size.⁹⁰

The impression created of an English agriculture of large farms has been reinforced by the apparent particularism and isolation of the communities characterised by small farms which were studied by Williams and, in Wales, Rees⁹¹ and by occasional pieces of work, such as by Quentin Bone in 1975,

⁸⁷ Lord Addison, p.27.

⁸⁸ Chapter 2, above.

⁸⁹ Sturme, 'Owner-Farming 1900 to 1950', p.287.

⁹⁰ Beckett and Turner, pp.289-300; Rothery, pp.251-68; Thompson, F.M.L., 'Land Market', pp.289-300.

⁹¹ Williams, W.M., *A West Country Village: Ashworthy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963); Williams, W.M., *The Sociology of an English Village* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956); Rees, *Life*.

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which emphasised that small farms had been deemed uncompetitive from early in the interwar period.⁹² Donajgrodzki in 1989 at least demonstrated that differences in scales of production had persisted into the early twentieth century in the North Riding, showing that the manner in which farming was undertaken before the Second World War was not simply uniform, either in size or in relation to the market; however, like Williams, his study was very localised and, furthermore, was suggestive of the inevitable decline of a marginal, somewhat terminologically questionable 'peasant', way of life.⁹³

The only grouping of interwar small farmers for whom any significant interest has been shown amongst university academics is that made up of individuals who chose to attempt small-scale cultivation on smallholdings, mostly created and subsidised by the State under various pieces of legislation from the 1890s onwards.⁹⁴ A renewed interest from the late 1960s onwards in organic farming and alternative forms of agriculture, landowning and settlement explains the turn towards the study of smallholdings amongst academics. These academics are drawn from those middle class groups which were becoming either recently resident in the countryside⁹⁵ or, in the case of the suburban middle class, perceiving, as part of a longer trend, that elitist cultural capital accrued to themselves from associating with, or 'consuming', the countryside.⁹⁶ The social and cultural values of these groups as they relate to the countryside

⁹² Bone, Q., 'Legislation to Revive Small Farming in England 1887-1914', *Agricultural History*, 49 4, (1975), 653-661, (p.661).

⁹³ Donajgrodzki, p.440.

⁹⁴ Smith, N.R., *Land*, p.234.

⁹⁵ Bell and Newby, p.100.

⁹⁵ Jones, T.P., 'Rural Depopulation', pp.110-131.

⁹⁶ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp.267, 279-81, 338; Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, pp.40-1.

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have turned out to be at odds with elements of the traditional power structure and of the farming practices of rural communities.⁹⁷ Conflict has arisen between the new middle class residents of the countryside and farmers and landholders. The interests of farmers and landholders, often coincidental since the farmer and the landholder are frequently the same person, lie in maintaining the traditional structures of social control which are undermined by new middle class residents, the environmental and nature concerns of whom conflict with the industrial realities of modern farming.⁹⁸ The precepts of these concerns are very much a feature of the particular manner of cultural consumption that Bourdieu recognises as pertaining to the middle class, a class from which, he makes clear through correspondence analysis, many academics are drawn.⁹⁹ Thus, the interest of academics in early twentieth century smallholdings finds a modern ruralist idealism reflected in the chosen area of study.

The idealism surrounding the modern study of smallholdings is reflected in the work of Hardy and Ward from 1984.¹⁰⁰ *Arcadia for All* addressed smallholdings within a wider study of the alternative rural communities that sprang up after the First World War as a reaction against modernism and urbanism, some of which stemmed from marginal political movements which later - in the 1960s - found adherents for reasons of 'distinction' amongst

⁹⁷ Newby et al., *Property*.

⁹⁸ Burchardt, *Paradise*, p.169; Short, 'Images', pp.1-2.

⁹⁹ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp.12-16; Jenkins, R., *Pierre Bourdieu* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.xiii; Bourdieu, P., and Passeron, J-C., *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (London: Sage, 1990), pp.71-106.

¹⁰⁰ Hardy and Ward.

sections of the middle class, such as anarchist geographers and teachers.¹⁰¹ Thirsk's work of 1997, *Alternative Agriculture: a History from the Black Death to the Present Day*, is, in essence, a history of the techniques and crops adopted by smallholders in the past that might give succour to those readers privileged enough to nourish a vision of – and perhaps enjoy – a life in the countryside more self-sustaining and less exploitative of the land than that offered by modern agribusiness, as evidenced by a section on the history of vegetarianism and references to articles in *The Times* and the *Spectator*.¹⁰² Thirsk is keen that modern alternative farming should learn from the interwar experience of smallholding and it appears that the statement, 'Voices are being raised to appreciate the social and agricultural values of family farms and smallholdings',¹⁰³ is certainly true in academic terms as the renewed interest in the history of smallholdings shows.¹⁰⁴ The values of the modern middle class and the cultural capital it sees in its appreciation of the countryside are particularly well reflected in Meredith's study of the smallholding colony at Lingfield where such values were distinctly evident in the interwar period; highly valued at Lingfield, for example, were the privately funded role of 'educated' people in revitalising the rural economy as well as a status conscious

¹⁰¹ Duane, M., 'Education for What? A Guide to the Dartington Experiment', *Contemporary Issues in Geography and Education (Journal of the Association for Curriculum Development in Geography): Anarchism and Geography*, 3 2, (1990), 113-39; Pepper, D., 'Geography and Landscapes of Anarchistic Visions of Britain: the Examples of Morris and Kropotkin', *Contemporary Issues in Geography and Education (Journal of the Association for Curriculum Development in Geography): Anarchism and Geography*, 3 2, (1990), 63-79.

¹⁰² Thirsk, *Alternative Agriculture*, pp.199-204, 247-8.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.247.

¹⁰⁴ Wade-Martins, S., 'Smallholdings: a Social and Farming Experiment in Norfolk, 1890-1950', *Agricultural History Review*, 54 2, (2006), 304-30; Meredith, A., 'From Ideals to Reality: the Women's Smallholding Colony at Lingfield, 1920-39', *Agricultural History Review*, 54 1, (2006), 105-21; Lockwood, pp.439-62.

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exclusivity.¹⁰⁵ These values were guaranteed by the requirement that Lingfield smallholders had a private annual income of £25 at a time when, as Sheila Todd reveals, young women earned about 10s 6d per week as domestic servants;¹⁰⁶ such typical wages amongst working class women would have excluded most women simply on grounds of the failure to possess adequate wealth. The romanticised notion of a countryside of small farmers appears to attract attention amongst the elitist middle class today just as it did amongst the First World War rural elitist reconstructionists and the nationalistic Yeoman Movement. The reconstructionists envisaged the establishment of 750,000 smallholdings.¹⁰⁷ The Yeoman Movement leaders, including Conservative M.P., W. Craven Ellis, were openly admiring of Hitler and Mussolini and their middle class support, but have gone unstudied despite desiring in the 1930s the creation of 500,000 smallholding families.¹⁰⁸ Griffiths has, at least, noted that the Labour Party was able to shed its romantic attachment to smallholdings as the interwar period advanced but, like the modern romantics, does not include in her work the traditional, petits bourgeois small farmers who had survived in large numbers into the 1920s.¹⁰⁹

The concentration on the study of aspects of smallholdings appears unwarranted from an economic perspective when it is considered that, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, only 29,355 publicly funded units of up to 50 acres

¹⁰⁵ Meredith, pp.108, 120.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p.111; Todd, S., 'Young Women, Work and Family in Interwar Rural England', *Agricultural History Review*, 52 1, (2004), 83-98, (p.92).

¹⁰⁷ Lockwood, p.439.

¹⁰⁸ NA/MAF/48/260, *Yeoman Movement Land Settlement Proposals: 'Report on the Opening of the Country to the Peoples'*. E. Hammond Foot, W. Craven Ellis, MP.

¹⁰⁹ Griffiths, *Labour*, pp.270-4.

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were established in England and Wales between 1908 and 1937.¹¹⁰ English smallholdings created between the Wars numbered at around 17,500 meaning that there were about fourteen times more small farms already in existence in 1919 in England than there were smallholdings created in the next eighteen years.¹¹¹ The limited studies of smallholdings do not address the prevalent understanding of the farm business structure of the interwar period as one characterised by extensive farms. The large number of existing small farms in the interwar period has generally been ignored whilst smallholdings have been idealised as an attempt at revitalising small farms with assumptions being made, but with little confirmation, that they were relatively unsuccessful, their failure being regarded as constituting the disappearance of the last of the small farms in England. Burchardt's indication that there was little support for smallholdings in the 1920s and 1930s¹¹² is only partially true, because these farms still had advocates across the period for reasons of national reinvigoration,¹¹³ and, particularly in the 1930s, for reasons of social control stemming from establishment fear of unemployment;¹¹⁴ Orwin was writing rather dismissively in 1930 of the existence of 'exponents of a Small Holdings policy for England' whose desire was to set up farms run by 'the family-farmer of the continental peasant type'.¹¹⁵ Burchardt, however, typifies the continued misunderstanding of the business size structure of agriculture meaning that the perception that

¹¹⁰ NA/MAF/48/104, *1935 Land Settlement: a) Memorandum on Schemes under the Smallholdings and Allotments Acts, 1908-26 b) Memorandum on the Present Economic Background Affecting Agriculture.*

¹¹¹ Smith, N.R., *Land*, pp.223-36; Lord Ernle, p.426.

¹¹² Burchardt, *Paradise*, p.142.

¹¹³ NA/MAF/48/260.

¹¹⁴ NA/MAF/48/87, *Special Conference of Land Commissioners, Government Land Policy, 1930.*

¹¹⁵ Orwin, *Future of Farming*, p.85.

there were few or no small farms left by the 1930s has been perpetuated, with only limited, recent but fleeting, reference offering any amelioration of this.¹¹⁶

The accepted understanding of the farm business structure of the interwar years was perhaps conditioned, firstly, by the prevailing Fordist social compromise that emerged after the Second World War and lasted until the late 1970s;¹¹⁷ during this period, farm size increased rapidly, reaching 155 acres by 1983 at a time when only 15 percent of farms were less than 100 acres in size.¹¹⁸ Thus, in the 1980s when the historicist, post-Fordist reassessments of the middle class and small business took place and the renaissance of the discourses of the 'entrepreneur' and 'small enterprise' arose,¹¹⁹ there was little genuinely small-scale farming left and the term 'family farming' was being used to describe something quite different from that undertaken on the small family farms of under 50 acres in size found in England between the Wars. Newby et al. commented upon the existence of circumstances where little paid labour was necessary for 'small' farmers at as late a date as 1981 but this situation resulted from the high levels of mechanization of agriculture that took place after the Second World War rather than the restrictions on labour inputs resulting from possession of inadequate farmland that had characterised interwar small

¹¹⁶ Sayer, pp.301-29; Short, 'Social Impact', p.177.

¹¹⁷ Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, pp.11-12; Merryfield, A., *Magical Marxism: Subversive Politics and the Imagination* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), p.101; Savage and Warde, p.58.

¹¹⁸ Grigg, 'Farm Size', pp.183-5.

¹¹⁹ Pittaway, L., 'The Evolution of Entrepreneurship Theory', in *Enterprise and Small Business*, 3rd edn., ed. by Carter, S., and Jones-Evans, D. (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2012), pp.9-26; Storey, D., 'Entrepreneurship and the New Firm', in *The Survival of the Small Firm, Volume 1*, ed. by Curran, J., Stanworth, J., and Watkins, D. (Aldershot: Gower 1986), pp.81-101; Bannock, G., *The Economics of Small Firms: Return from the Wilderness* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981).

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farms.¹²⁰ Limited exploration of contemporary family farming in Britain took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s, notably by Gasson and Errington.¹²¹ Farming in the 1980s was undertaken on a much greater scale in terms of capital and of land-capital employed than in the interwar years and was in a relationship with capitalism described by Gasson and Errington as 'fully embracing at an economic level'.¹²² Even where farming was undertaken on a part-time basis, holdings were of a considerable size, averaging well above 50 acres in the 1980s, and required substantial capital because of technical limitations that created excess machinery capacity and necessitated Government aid that was noticeably biased towards larger and full-time farms.¹²³ In reality, it had become very difficult to equate the 'family' farm of the 1980s with the 'small' farm of the interwar period and this resulted in no real attempt being made to explore the extent of the persistence or viability of farms of under 50 acres into the twentieth century despite their existence in 1919 in considerable numbers, as shown by the *Agricultural Statistics*.

The lack of interest is understandable given that few studies sought to maintain that a small farm 'peasantry' had survived beyond the agricultural revolution and the enclosures. Reed and Donajgrodzki, though undoubtedly raising a challenge to the accepted wisdom on the pre-nineteenth century disappearance of small scale 'peasant' farmers and possibly to the ideologically adventitious motives of Macfarlane, tended to convey a sense of the inevitable

¹²⁰ Newby et al., 'Farming for Survival', pp.44-5; Reid, I.G., *The Small Farm on Heavy Land* (Wye: London University Publications, 1958), pp.1-31.

¹²¹ Gasson and Errington.

¹²² Ibid., p.3.

¹²³ Gasson, R., *The Economics of Part-Time Farming* (Harlow: Longman Scientific and Technical, 1988), pp.92, 109, 115.

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decline and disappearance of a people involved in a noble but doomed cause.¹²⁴

Demonstrations of the survival of small farmers into the twentieth century are to be found in work on Cumbrian upland farmers by Shepherd and by Crowe, but both of these are localised, anthropological-economic studies of the years before the interwar period that ignore the wider implications of the existence of large numbers of small farms between the Wars.¹²⁵ Winstanley's local study asserts that small farms were integrated into the wider economy by the late nineteenth century but does not carry on the theme into the twentieth.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Reed, "'Gnawing'", pp.83-94; Reed, 'Nineteenth Century'; Donajgradzki, 'Twentieth Century'; Reed, 'Peasantry of Nineteenth Century Rural England: a Neglected Class?'

¹²⁵ Crowe, H., 'Profitable Ploughing of the Uplands: the Food Production Campaign of the First World War,' *Agricultural History Review*, 55 2, (2007), 205-28; Shepherd, M.E., 'The Small Owner in Cumbria c. 1840-1910: a Case Study from the Upper Eden Valley', *Northern History*, 35, (1999), 161-84.

¹²⁶ Winstanley, M., 'Industrialization and the Small Farm: Family and Household Economy in Nineteenth Century Lancashire', *Past and Present*, 152, (1996), 157-95.

The Decline of Small Farms between the Wars

A substantial decline took place in the fortunes of those farms considered to be 'small' between the close of the First World War and the 1980s when the limited attention noted above was paid to family farming. Farms considered 'small' in 1919 - those of one to 50 acres in size - made up over 65 percent of total farms in that year whilst the same 'small' category of farms in 1983, despite having doubled its upper size limit to include farms of up to 100 acres and excluded farms of less than five acres in extent, was constituted of less than 15 percent of all holdings; simultaneously, the number of 'statistically significant'¹²⁷ holdings in England, with the exclusion of Monmouth, had fallen between 1919 and 1983 from 353,433¹²⁸ to 185,993 in 1983.¹²⁹ Thus, it is clear that a long term decline in farmer numbers had occurred that featured a disproportionately high level of disappearance amongst small farmers. The decline in numbers of farms, as well as the disproportionate share that small farmers contributed to it, began between the Wars. The total number of farms of one to 50 acres that disappeared between 1919 and 1939 was 45,729. This is a figure equivalent to 20 percent of the 228,783 small farms in 1919, a percentage somewhat higher than the 14 percent that represents the proportion of all farms that disappeared. Thus, it is no surprise that small farms, which constituted 65 percent of all

¹²⁷ Grigg, 'Farm Size', p.184.

¹²⁸ Table 3.3 and *Sources; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Table 10 (pp.38-9).

¹²⁹ Grigg, 'Farm Size', p.184.

farms, made up over 90 percent of the 49,794 farms that disappeared between the Wars.¹³⁰

Numbers of small farmers underwent decline between the Wars at a time when dairy farms were renowned for being smaller than arable ones;¹³¹ this certainly seems to contradict the simplistic narrative of dairy success or, at least, stability at the expense of arable that is presented in the historiography. Furthermore, calculations using data from the *Agricultural Statistics* show that an increase took place in the average size of farm in interwar England of almost 5 acres. England's average farm grew by 7.5 percent from just over 67 acres to just over 72 between 1919 and 1939.¹³² This type of farm size analysis might actually be of relevance to a better interpretation of the narratives that are already in existence in the historiography because it could offer a statistical basis for the conclusions they make regarding interwar agricultural conditions which rely generally only upon commentary avowing contrasting circumstances affecting broad farming types. Indeed, the method of the analysis of farm disappearance by size category could have been extrapolated at any time from the existing tendency in the historiography of basing conclusions on analysis of two broad farming types, such as dairy and arable. This is simply because arable farms were regarded as covering larger average acreages than dairy ones. This alone, in terms of the existing historiography, would be a suitable reason for examining farm size. Thus, it would have been reasonable to suggest

¹³⁰ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Table 11 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Table 10 (pp.38-9).

¹³¹ Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, p.5; Whetham, *Agrarian History*, p.44; Venn, 1923, *Foundations*, pp.60-1.

¹³² Table 3.2.

that any fall to be found in the average size of all farms in England between the Wars, at a time when farms, farmers and arable farmland were disappearing at a considerable rate, would have been attributable to the disappearance of farms of larger than average size which were more likely to be arable farms. This would be indicative, at least, of more difficult operating conditions for arable farmers than for dairy farmers which might then be explored further using other sources.¹³³

However, the increase in average farm size between 1919 and 1939 that has actually been found is, clearly, not consistent with the simplified notion that arable farming as a whole was suffering and that dairy farming was, at worst, stable and was, perhaps, prosperous. The expansion of farms indicated by increases in farm size is suggestive of prosperity amongst larger farms at a time when arable farms are considered to have been larger than dairy farms. Prosperity amongst arable farmers is one particular set of circumstances that the existing historiography maintains consistently was not apparent in the interwar years. Of course, the increased average farm size may have been caused by increases in the sizes of pastoral and other non-arable farms. Changes in the overall acreage of farmland in use and in the specific purposes to which such land was being put might confirm this. The decrease in arable farmland of three million acres that the *Agricultural Statistics* show took place was greater than the overall decrease in farmland in use, indicating that arable land was being used for other agricultural purposes, such as dairying; the total acreage of farmland in England fell by 2,122,797 between 1919 and 1939 which is a figure significantly

¹³³ Table 3.1; Table 3.2; Table 3.3.

less than that for the fall in the arable acreage, virtually confirming the conversion of around a million acres of arable land to use in other types of farming. There was a concurrent increase of 892,615 acres in the area of permanent grass in England in the same years which tends to confirm the transfer of land from arable to pastoral use, thereby reiterating that difficulties existed in arable production or, at least, that pastoral production offered a better alternative, thereby adding another confusing element to the argument about interwar agricultural conditions.¹³⁴

It is obvious that the debate on interwar agricultural conditions is characterised by contradiction which originates in past attempts to make conclusions regarding farming as a whole in England from the circumstances prevailing in one of two major farming types. Contradiction appears to be compounded by the introduction of new statistical evidence but the confusion results more from the method of research previously undertaken than the statistical evidence itself simply because the statistical data appears to contrast with pre-existing conclusions made regarding both arable farm size and interwar conditions. It is important that the search for any more information regarding farming fortunes as related to farming type at this stage recognises that farm size needs to be taken very much into account. This is especially true given the weaknesses that have been exposed above in the existing arguments in the historiography for the use of broad farming type as the indicator of prosperity or decline of farmers and of agriculture as a whole; in this regard, it is notable that it is only generally by excluding either arable or dairy farms from conclusions on

¹³⁴ Table 3.1.

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interwar agricultural conditions that either success or failure can be ascribed to the industry as a whole, as historians appear wont to do. Another contradictory element in the analysis is found in the disproportionately high rate of disappearance of farms of smaller than average size, farms that were less likely to be arable than dairy farms. Small farm difficulties are likely to be, if anything, more suggestive of difficulties amongst dairy farmers than the arable farmers who have generally been assumed to have suffered.

The suggestion, made above, that contrasts in farmers' fortunes existed between the Wars must be assessed in tandem with the unexpected increases found in average farm size and the disproportionately high numbers of disappearing small farms, both of which certainly suggest that farm size was a factor in the chances of interwar farm survival. It seems that more understanding might be gained regarding the structural changes taking place in agriculture suggested by the evidence on farm size, especially the decline of small farms, from further statistical examination of the size structure of English farms, initially at the beginning and end of the period, than from extended probing of the existing historiography.

Size as the Primary Influence upon a Farm's Chance of Interwar Survival

The stark contrast in the relative decreases in numbers of large and small farms, outlined above, makes it clear that the amount of land that was available to a farmer was an extremely important factor in the chances of survival in the interwar English agricultural industry. Examination of data from the *Agricultural Statistics* on numbers of farms in two basic size categories in England at the beginning and end of the interwar period reveals a considerable difference in the fortunes of farms either bigger or smaller than 50 acres. Decreases took place in total numbers in both groups but were far more extensive, both absolutely and relatively, amongst the smaller farms than the larger. There were 124,650 farms of 50 acres and above in extent in existence in 1919 and this number had fallen by 4,065 to 120,585 in 1939 so that their numbers decreased by less than 3.5 percent between 1919 and 1939. In contrast, since the *Agricultural Statistics* for England, excluding Monmouth, show that those occupying between one and 50 acres decreased in number by 45,729 from 228,783 to 183,054, a fall of 20 percent, the decrease in numbers of small farms is seen to be almost eleven times greater than the fall in the numbers in the category of larger farms. It must, therefore, be recognised that the odds of failure of a small farm were far greater than those of a larger one: 1 in 5 small farms failed, according to the *Agricultural Statistics*, as opposed to only 1 in almost 31 farms of fifty acres and larger.¹³⁵

¹³⁵ Table 3.3.

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The reality is that small farms disappeared at an even higher rate than the 20 percent calculated from the *Agricultural Statistics*. Reference has been made in Chapter Two to the figures calculated from the *Agricultural Statistics* for 1919 and 1939 on the disappearance of farms being an underestimate due to the creation of 17,500 smallholdings in England between the Wars.¹³⁶ The failure of the *Agricultural Statistics* to show the gross rate of farm disappearance means that, pertinently, they do not reveal the true extent of the disappearance of small farms, underestimating as well the disparity between the failure rates of large and small farms. The figure of 17,500 representing the smallholdings created needs to be added to the number from the *Agricultural Statistics* used to show the total number of small farms known to have been in existence during the interwar period in order to calculate the full extent of the decrease occurring in the numbers of small farms between 1919 and 1939; there were, therefore, at least 246,283 farms of between one and 50 acres in existence between the Wars. Small farms in 1939 numbered just 183,054 meaning that 63,229 of them had disappeared since the First World War, a figure representing over 25.5 percent; 1 in 4 small farms ceased to exist during the interwar period. It must be recognised that there is no evidence to suggest that farms of above 50 acres were created between the Wars and, thus, that no similar disparity can be assumed to have existed between the net and gross rates of disappearance of farms of greater than 50 acres in size to that of the smaller category. No records exist of any systematic large farm creation akin to that by which Parliamentary legislation was enacted specifically to create smallholdings that

¹³⁶ Smith, N.R., *Land*, pp.234-6; Figure 2.2 and Ch.2 fn.148; Figure 6.1 and Ch.6 fn. 21; Chapter 2, above.

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were of less than 50 acres.¹³⁷ There is a contradiction apparent in the creation of 17,500 English smallholdings during the interwar period when times were so hard for small farms, especially given that larger farms appear to have been a more promising proposition, but this will be addressed in Chapter Five.

The greatest fall in farm numbers in size categories containing substantial numbers of holdings regarded as full-time farms occurred in farms of five to 20 acres in size. The *National Farm Survey Report* describes the category of five to 20 acre farms as containing holdings farmed substantially by the type of occupier who should 'be properly called a farmer' or 'properly regarded as a farmer and his holding as a farm'¹³⁸ and Gasson maintains that 95 percent of farms of over five acres in size were full time farms between the Wars.¹³⁹ The net fall between 1919 and 1939 was of 25.5 percent, actual numbers of holdings falling by 24,467 between 1920 and 1939, from 93,799 to 71,561; the rate would be higher were smallholdings that were created of this size included in the calculation but the numbers of smallholdings that existed in each size category is not known.¹⁴⁰ Thus, at least a quarter of farmers on the smallest full-time farms seem to have gone out of business in the years between the Wars. Holdings of between one and five acres cannot be ignored because they were not all part-time holdings and many were created for various reasons during the interwar period as full-time and part-time smallholdings,¹⁴¹ as will be explored later in this thesis. Even where they were part-time, these holdings may have contributed

¹³⁷ Table 3.3.

¹³⁸ MAF, *National Farm Survey*, pp.8, 13.

¹³⁹ Gasson, p.9.

¹⁴⁰ Table 3.3.

¹⁴¹ Smith, N.R., *Land*, pp.90-137.

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significantly to the incomes of those running them and their families and may have been a factor in the construction of the identities of their occupiers. Farms of one to five acres in extent saw a net fall of just over 25 percent 1920-39, not including smallholdings, a very slightly smaller fall than among those of five to 20 acres, suggesting that considerable difficulty in achieving any kind of success in farming was faced by any cultivator of limited acreages, whether full-time or part-time.¹⁴²

The next most hard hit size category of farm holdings after the five to 20 acre group is the one immediately above it, that of holdings of 20 to 50 acres in size, which saw a considerable net fall in numbers of 8,361 from a 1920 total of 66,270 to 57,909 in 1939, a fall equivalent to just over 12.5 percent of its total.¹⁴³ This group falls within the category delineated by the *National Farm Survey Report* as containing holdings occupied by almost 95 percent of farmers who should be 'properly called a farmer'.¹⁴⁴ The fall in numbers in this group was still considerable but, as can be seen, was only just over a third of the size of the numerical fall in the category of farms of five to 20 acres and less than half its size in percentage terms.¹⁴⁵

Farms above fifty acres in size shows a decrease over the interwar period of only 3.3 percent or a larger decrease of 3.8 percent if 1920 is taken as the starting date, the year 1919 to 1920 having shown an increase in the number of farms overall and in this size group. Within this size category of farms of 50

¹⁴² Table 3.3 and *Sources.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ MAF, *National Farm Survey*, p.8.

¹⁴⁵ Table 3.3.

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acres and above, farms of 50 to 100 acres remained stable in numbers and would have shown an increase but for a fall between 1938 and 1939. Farms of 100 to 150 acres showed a fall of less than 1 percent between 1919 and 1939 indicating that as size of holdings above 100 acres increased, a slightly greater chance of disappearance existed than amongst those holdings of 50 to 100 acres.¹⁴⁶

It is apparent that there existed during the interwar years in England an increasing chance of farm failure as size of holding decreased below 50 acres, demonstrated by the numbers disappearing from the smaller size categories being much higher than from the large. It is also likely that the rate of small farm business disappearance may be underestimated since amalgamation of small farms in single businesses with the farm holdings still contributing individually to the total farm numbers in the *Agricultural Statistics* tends to be higher amongst small farms than large ones.¹⁴⁷

Conclusion

Clearly the incidence of failure amongst small-scale farmers was much higher than that amongst those farming larger acreages. It is also reasonable to say that the statistical data that has been amended to take into account the establishment of smallholdings indicates that small farms were, indeed, in a

¹⁴⁶ Table 3.3.

¹⁴⁷ Harrison, A., 'Some Features of Farm Business Structures', *Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 16 3, (1965), 330-54.

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considerably more precarious position than larger farms. Furthermore, it must be argued that, measured by the level of farm disappearance and of the size of the holdings involved, the interwar period cannot realistically be judged to have been one of success for small-scale farmers or, at least, not for those whose farms and livelihoods numbered amongst the disappeared. It must be recognised that the discovery that interwar failure was mainly experienced by small farmers means that the narratives of interwar agriculture that have ascribed failure to arable farming would, if it were wished that they remain tenable, have to at least be adjusted to suggest that it was only the smaller arable farmers that failed but it must also be recognised that there is no evidence so far produced to support such an assertion, whether here or anywhere else.

A serious shortcoming in the historiography of interwar English agriculture has been identified in this chapter. There has been a tendency to date to make reference to difficulties amongst farmers engaged in arable farming and to success amongst dairy farmers but to ignore one or the other of them in conclusions relating to the performance of agriculture as a whole. The tendency to overlook one or other of arable or dairy farming seems to stem from an apparent desire to ascribe either absolute success or failure to the performance of agriculture as an industry between the Wars. This chapter has been open in confronting the possibility that farmers experienced a broad range of economic conditions in agriculture between the Wars but has addressed it from the new perspective of farm size thrown up by the general tendency to search for success or failure as governed by broad farming types.

Chapter 3: Farm Size as the Explanation of Contrasting Narratives

The widely accepted notion that arable farming was undertaken on larger farms than pastoral farming gave rise to a decision to look at fortunes of farmers taking into account changes in sizes of farms. The expectation was that arable failure and dairy success would have resulted in diminishing average farm size. The surprising discovery is that average farm size in England has been found to have increased between the Wars, the corollary being that small farms have been found to have decreased in numbers by over 25 percent, a figure far higher than that for farms of more than 50 acres in extent. Small farm disappearance is surprising because the existing historiography has either stressed or implied that any agricultural difficulties experienced were likely to have been on arable farms. It would, thus, appear that any narrative of interwar distress in agriculture should not focus necessarily on arable farming, as was the case for most of the conclusions in the twentieth century historiography of the interwar period, but on small farmers. The representation of interwar agriculture as a success in the historiography that has been written in the twenty-first century is a failing because of the lack of attention paid to the fate – even the actual existence - of small farmers.

The ignorance of the very existence of the vast majority of small farmers between the Wars, let alone of their demise, has been shown to have afflicted the written histories of the period. Although some explanation has been offered for the failure of the historiography to address small farms, the causes of the gaps are by no means clear but they lie in the events surrounding agriculture in the interwar period itself and in the structures of rural society and agriculture as inherited by the interwar period. Consideration must be given to narratives of

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distress that emerged during the interwar period being the result of the problems affecting mainly small farmers; however, the absence of the identification of small farmers from written histories of the period suggests the existence of a degree of selectivity in use of the original sources by writers, either during the period itself or afterwards or at both these times. Such selectivity would act in support of the desire of large-scale producers and landowners hoping to benefit from potential Government aid to agriculture, as will be discussed in Chapter 6.

New evidence needs to be brought to bear upon interwar agriculture in an attempt to identify how dairy farming has been represented in the more recent historiography as the saviour of interwar farming at the same time as those small-scale farmers who might be assumed to be its proponents appear to have been in severe decline; this is the task of the next chapter.

Chapter 4: The Consequences of Arable Farming Difficulties for Small Dairy Farms in England between the Wars

Introduction

The statistical data confirming the existence of interwar agricultural hardship in the form of the disappearance of small-scale farms has been shown in Chapter Three to be inconsistent with the logic of the historiography of interwar English farming. The historiography maintains that difficulties were, if existent at all, experienced in arable farming which is renowned for being a large-scale operation. Suggestions that there existed difficulties in arable farming appear somewhat incongruous given the statistics presented here that demonstrate the prevalence of disappearance of farms belonging to categories of small farms. The statistics suggest that, if anything, pastoral and other types of farms were more likely to have failed since they are renowned for having been smaller than arable farms.¹ Small farm categories would have included many of the dairy type of pastoral farms deemed in some twenty-first century accounts to have been flourishing and used as a measure to demonstrate the overall success of agriculture between the Wars.²

The inconsistencies between the historiography and the statistical evidence that have been demonstrated in Chapter Three suggest that farm failures may not have been confined to arable farming in England between the Wars; farm failures may have affected farmers wherever farms were small, that

¹ Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, p.5; Whetham, *Agrarian History*, p.44; Venn, 1923, *Foundations*, pp.60-1.

² Chapter 3, above.

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is, in both of the more extensive branches of the industry as well as in other less conspicuous farming types. The possibility emerges that small farm failure was ubiquitous in English interwar agriculture and the beginning of an investigation into this possibility is the task of this chapter. In order for this to be undertaken, some generalised means of differentiating between small farms in different branches of agriculture and, in particular, in arable and dairy farming, would be best pursued. Differentiation is necessary so that it can be established whether it was farming on a small scale of one or more particular types that led directly to farm failure, with arable farms being the likely candidate according to the historiography but dairy most likely according to the statistics. The contradiction between the historiography and the statistics make it eminently possible that it was the very scale of small farming in general that was at the root of the problem. The result will determine the direction from which an investigation can be launched in the following chapters into the reasons for the causes of the difficulties faced by small farmers between the Wars revealed by the statistics on farm disappearance; also enabled will be both a search for the reasons for the failure of the historiography to recognise this small farmer decline and an investigation into any connection between the causes of small farm failure and the failure of the historiography to recognise it earlier.

The identification of the cause of contradictions between the historiography and the statistical evidence is complicated by difficulties which have been shown to exist in differentiating between individual farms of any one particular farming type from another in the statistics; however, one avenue can be pursued. An examination is undertaken in the following chapter of regional

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farm disappearance that takes into consideration the existence of a general agricultural division in England. The general understanding has existed that rural England, as a result of historical, geophysical and climatic conditions, is constituted of two regions of contrasting agricultural production, each region being largely characterised as arable or pastoral, and that this was necessarily the case between the Wars.³ Tendencies in the existing historiography suggest that economic problems of interwar English agriculture may have been generally experienced in arable farming whilst prosperity existed in pastoral farming and, in particular, in milk production. It is possible that these contrasting economic conditions may have been experienced in the regions generally associated with each of these farming types. Patterns of varying agricultural fortunes will be established from analysis of statistics available on the changing agricultural production and conditions in individual counties within these two regions in England. The tendencies indicating difficulties in arable farming lead to the supposition that the arable region is more likely to have witnessed the disappearance of larger numbers of farms and farmers than the pastoral. Counties within the pastoral region that specialised in dairy farming would be expected to show patterns of farm disappearance at considerable variance with counties specialising in arable production.

Contradictions in the historiography of interwar agriculture based on the performance of contrasting farming types clearly need to be investigated and the existence of the two regions regarded as being characterised either by arable or

³ Venn, 1923, *Foundations*, pp.60-1; Caird, frontispiece; Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, p.5; Whetham, *Agrarian History*, p.29.

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pastoral production can be used as a general guide to conditions. Data on numbers of farms and farm size from counties within the two zones regarded as being characterised by arable or pastoral production will be used in combination with other indicators of the economic conditions of agriculture to examine these inconsistencies. Although dairy production forms only one branch of the pastoral farming of the northern and western pastoral zone, the focus will remain generally on the two farming types of arable and dairy, at least in the initial stages of investigation.

The origins of any perception that may have arisen from this study so far of only dairy and arable farming being undertaken in England between the Wars lie in the historiography to date which has used these types as the general measure of conditions in agriculture as a whole at the time, as has been shown, above, in Chapter One. Reference is, indeed, made in written histories to other farming types and products⁴ but, overall, interwar agriculture has been judged by that specific evidence presented in the historiography which is suggestive of either failure in the arable sector or success in dairy farming. Dairy farming, as a branch of pastoral farming, must be assumed to have predominantly taken place in the North and West but, given that it is only a subset of pastoral farming, the issue of the fortunes of the other major branch of pastoral farming, namely livestock grazing, will arise. Consideration will also be given to other specialist farming types, the existence of which may have had an impact on statistics concerning the disappearance of farms, particularly where they may

⁴ Whetham, *Agrarian History*, pp.6-8, 11-14, 109-11, 165-8, 287-96.

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have been undertaken on small-scale holdings, such as in the case of market gardening and poultry rearing.

Answers are required as to whether success and failure were seen on farms of varying sizes in different areas or whether the disproportionately high level of small farm disappearance in England coincided with counties where dairying and, thus, small farms were predominant. The chapter will proceed, using statistical evidence, to demonstrate the veracity of the division of the rural England of 1919 into two zones, each one dominated by either arable or pastoral farming. Average farm size will then be examined in counties within the two regions to establish that the generalization regarding the size of farm associated with each type of farming is valid for the interwar period. Particular attention needs to be paid to whether small farm failure was concentrated in any particular areas or farming type; therefore, the investigation will proceed by looking at the incidence of the disappearance of farms in the counties of the West Riding and Lancashire, both considered to be dairy counties. The exploration will continue to use primary and secondary sources as well as statistical data.

Evidence of the growing competition within the dairy industry after the First World War other than that provided by statistics will also be provided. The year of 1920 saw the removal of State regulation used to control the dairy industry during the First World War. The chapter will conclude with a brief overview of the developments in the industry between 1920 and 1933 focusing particularly upon the ways in which increased production in the industry affected

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smaller farmers. The year of 1933 was one of great significance for dairy producers as it saw the creation of the MMB, set up to control distribution in a dairy market that, left to its own devices, appeared to be behaving contrary to the interests of the very producers necessary to supply it with its single and, thus, vital product: milk. The accuracy of the interpretation of the MMB as being of general benefit to farmers will be examined later in this thesis whereas the further evidence on the state of the milk market and the conditions for dairy farmers across England necessary to contribute to that interpretation will be provided in this chapter and the subsequent one.

The Structure and Distribution of Interwar Dairy and Arable Agriculture

The following passage looks at two related propositions regarding interwar English agriculture that have been established in the historiography. The first proposition is that the countryside was divided roughly into two regions with one of the two broad agricultural types – pastoral and arable - tending to be undertaken predominantly in each region. Secondly, each type was undertaken on farms of a certain size which were characteristic of each region, arable farms being generally larger than pastoral farms and, thus, by definition, than dairy farms.

A spatial division has been commonly made in the historiography in regard to farming types in England before the Second World War. Each of the two broad types of farming, arable and pastoral, has been regarded as taking

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place primarily in one of the two agricultural areas into which England can be roughly divided. A basic geographical division of England into two zones of contrasting farming types exists in the early written history of nineteenth century agriculture, notably James Caird's *English Agriculture in 1850-51*; indeed, the frontispiece of Caird's text displays a map of the simplified division of production between the arable farming of the southern and eastern lowlands and the upland pastoral farming of the north and west.⁵ Thus, there exists a line that created two regions of broadly contrasting agricultural production which has its origins in a geological feature, a ridge of Jurassic limestone running south west to north east which, when extended to include the Hambleton and Cleveland Hills to the north-east, forms the division known as the 'Tees-Exe' line.⁶ Howkins' suggestion that the division into two agricultural regions is one that remained relevant throughout the twentieth century corresponds with Whetham's earlier observation that the line merely shifts westwards or eastwards depending upon changes in the prevailing economic conditions.⁷ Venn confirms that, in 1923, arable farming was the province of farms in southern and eastern counties whilst pastoral farming was characteristic of holdings of the north and west.⁸

Venn's additional suggestion that dairy counties in the pastoral farm zone tended to be characterised by farms smaller than those in arable areas⁹ has

⁵ Caird, frontispiece.

⁶ Jewell, H.M., *The North-South Divide: the Origins of Northern Consciousness in England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p.8.

⁷ Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, p.5; Whetham, *Agrarian History*, p.29.

⁸ Venn, 1923, *Foundations*, pp.60-1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.60-1.

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been made consistently in the literature concerning interwar agriculture.¹⁰ Addison calculated that 83 percent of holdings of less than 50 acres in size were reliant to a considerable degree on dairying, even by as late a date as 1938.¹¹ Counties where arable was predominant would be expected to have an average size farm greater than the national average with the opposite being true for the pastoral zone and, thus, for dairy farms. The assertion regarding contrasts in farm size between arable and pastoral farming is, indeed, borne out by statistical evidence from various counties situated in one or other of the two regions. Mean average farm size in 1919 in the northern dairy county of Lancashire was only just over 42 acres whilst, in the adjacent counties of the West Riding of Yorkshire and Cheshire which, like Lancashire, had large and accessible urban markets for fresh milk, average farm size was just under 48 acres and just over 45, respectively; in England as a whole, average farm size was 67 acres and in England and Wales, just over 64. The south-western county of Devon, a more rural pastoral county than those in the north but well known for its dairy production, had an average farm size of 70 acres, just over the national average. Another western county, Gloucestershire, shared farm size characteristics with Devon as well as other agricultural features. It had an average farm size of 70 and was more northerly than Devon only to the extent that Somerset separated the two, but it was certainly predominantly pastoral in character, having 62 percent of its agricultural area in grazing land; it was mentioned as a significant contributor of fresh milk to two market areas in R.B. Forrester's 1927

¹⁰ This Chapter, above.

¹¹ Lord Addison, p.243.

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contribution on the fluid milk market to MAF's *Economic Series*¹² and had a dairy herd of almost 40,000 cattle. Confirmation of the credentials of the milk counties as pastoral lies in the percentage of land that they dedicated to arable farming being considerably lower than the average for England, as a whole, which was just over 47 percent in 1919; in the West Riding it was 36 and in both Lancashire and Gloucestershire it was 38.¹³

Those counties in the south and east, well known traditionally for their arable cultivation would be expected to have exhibited farm sizes considerably above the national average in 1919 and to have a high percentage of land dedicated to arable production. Hampshire, on the south coast of England, fulfilled the criteria for an arable county and not simply because it is designated by Whetham as having been one in 1914.¹⁴ Hampshire falls within the area considered to have been characterised by arable agriculture and this is confirmed by the statistics that show 63 percent of its farmland being taken up by arable crops in 1919; note has been made that the percentage of farmland used for arable cultivation in England, as a whole, was a little more than 47 in 1919. The mean average farm size in Hampshire corresponds with the expected pattern for predominantly arable counties insofar it was larger than the national average of 67.5 acres in 1919; Hampshire's average was relatively modest at almost 71 acres but was still larger than the average farm size of the dairy counties considered, above. The average farm sizes in other arable counties

¹² Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (R.B. Forrester), *Economic Series No.16; The Fluid Milk Market* (London: HMSO, 1927), p.19.

¹³ Table 3.1; Table 3.2; Table 4.1 including *Sources; Table 5.1 including *Sources.

¹⁴ Whetham, *Agrarian History*, p.2.

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were larger. Arable counties with larger average farm sizes than Hampshire's ranged from Norfolk, where arable covered just less than 75 percent of the total agricultural area and where the average farm size was close to 80 acres, to West Sussex, with an average farm size of 83.5 acres, to Essex, with 88. Even larger average sizes were to be found. The East Riding of Yorkshire had an average of 95 acres and an arable acreage covering 70 percent of farmland whilst in West Suffolk, where farmland was 80 percent arable, farms averaged almost 100 acres in size. In the midlands but within the region depicted as arable, Huntingdon had an average farm size of 84.5 acres and arable crops covering 63.5 percent of its farmland.¹⁵

Counties within the area renowned historically for arable production tended to have considerably more land in arable production in 1919 than those counties that were known for dairying. The actuality is that the differential between the respective acreages in use for arable cultivation in arable and dairy areas was larger even than has been suggested. The acreages pertaining to arable use in counties where arable farming predominated could be construed, in all probability, as being larger than the acreage shown by the *Agricultural Statistics* as being under arable crops in any one particular year because figures for the acreage of temporary grass could be added to those for arable crops in arable counties. Temporary grassland was usually being used in this temporary way as leys, that is, as part of an arable rotation;¹⁶ this would, of course, increase the percentage of land that was generally in use as part of an arable

¹⁵ Table 3.1; Table 3.2; Table 5.1; Table 5.2 including *Sources; Table 5.6 including *Sources.

¹⁶ Whetham, *Agrarian History*, pp.2-3.

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farm system in such counties, exacerbating the differential of the percentages of land used for arable purposes between arable and pastoral counties, especially dairy counties.

'Arable' counties, defined as such because of the nature of their production in 1919 as much as by their location within a traditionally arable region, have been shown above to have had a greater average farm size than dairy counties at the beginning of the interwar period, but exceptions existed. Lincoln-Holland was in the arable zone but had an average farm size of only 45 acres in 1919. The historical development of the agriculture of Lincoln Holland was, indeed, singular. The county's agricultural layout was the result of specific historical and topographical conditions. Drainage problems had delayed modern development of the county's fenland but technological advance in the form of steam pumps meant that small, unproductive farms had been transformed deliberately in the mid-nineteenth century into small highly fertile, high rent arable farms alongside a few newly created large farms.¹⁷ Another reason for the unexpectedly low average farm size in Lincoln-Holland is the deliberate creation of large numbers of smallholdings of up to 50 acres in the county by the Ministry of Agriculture from 1919 onwards which, along with smallholding creation by the County Council, gave Lincoln-Holland the fifth largest total number of smallholdings of any county in England and Wales, despite its

¹⁷ Beastall, T.W., *The Agricultural Revolution in Lincolnshire* (Lincoln: History of Lincolnshire Committee, 1978), pp.67-73; Grigg, D., *The Agricultural Revolution in South Lincolnshire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp.170-1, 197.

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comparatively small total area and small total number of farms.¹⁸ Lincoln Holland's location in the arable zone is, anyway, understandable, given that 78 percent of its farmland was arable in 1919. The delineation into arable and pastoral zones of England's interwar agriculture is given credibility by the proportion of farmland given over to arable crops in Lincoln-Holland being the highest of all the counties examined. Lincoln-Holland is exceptional for its low average farm size for an arable county but, exceptions aside, even average farm sizes of around 70 acres in some arable counties, such as Hampshire, which were at the lower end of the scale for such counties, were similar to those at the upper end of the scale for dairy counties.¹⁹

The existence in Lincoln-Holland of large numbers of small farms in a distinctly arable county demonstrates that generalizations about interwar agriculture should not be accepted without demur and this includes the generalizations about difficulties and success of broad farming types. The historiography of interwar rural England to date has not conceived of success and failure as industry-wide possibilities but only as occurring uniquely within particular broad farming types; the investigation, from here onwards, will be into whether or not both success and failure were apparent within farming types and especially within arable and dairy farming. The gross decrease of over 18 percent in farm numbers that took place between the Wars certainly indicates widespread failure, the distribution of which across the industry needs

¹⁸ NA/MAF/48/321, *Holbeach Farm Settlement, Main Acquisition*; NA/MAF/48/330, *Sutton Bridge Farm Settlement, Acquisition from Guy's Hospital Lincolnshire Estate, 1919-23*; Smith, N.R., *Land*, pp.234-6.

¹⁹ Table 5.8; Table 5.9 and *Sources.

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elucidation, but failure may have occurred in ways that simple increases and decreases in farm numbers seen in conjunction with claims about the conditions affecting a particular farming type might not make immediately imaginable. Difficulties associated with one type of farming, notably the shrinkage by over a quarter of the arable acreage in England,²⁰ might encourage the assumption simply that arable farms would have failed, gone out of business and disappeared from the statistics; such an understanding would suggest, consequently, that farms in the arable region would have disappeared in large numbers since it has been argued consistently that arable farming was the least likely type of farming to have prospered. The difficulties amongst arable farmers coupled with the predominance of small farms amongst those that disappeared that has been demonstrated in the previous chapter might also lead to the simple assumption that a large majority of the farms that disappeared would have been small arable ones and that, consequently, disappearance would have taken place at a higher rate in the arable region. The corollary would be that a certain pattern of stability or increase of farm numbers might be expected to be discovered in dairy counties in conjunction with, perhaps, changes in land use to accommodate new farms and even a fall in average farm size as large units were divided into the smaller farms associated with dairy farming at the time.

The following section will examine the renowned fresh milk producing counties of the West Riding and Lancashire, concentrating upon changes in size and numbers of farms alongside other indicators of agricultural performance and conditions in two counties which have been shown to conform to the

²⁰ Chapter 3, above; Table 3.1.

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generalizations about pastoral counties in terms both of their location – northern - and average farm size - small. The context will be the inconsistencies between the existing historiography, with its narrative of prosperity in dairy farming and difficulties in arable, and the statistics revealed so far in this thesis on extensive small farm disappearance that indicate the possibility of difficulties amongst dairy farmers.

Prosperity in Interwar Dairy Farming and its Repercussions

The twenty-first century historiography of interwar rural England has indicated that prosperity was to be found in dairy farming. The typical method used in the historiography to support claims made about the conditions in interwar English agriculture has been to look at contemporary commentaries, sometimes in conjunction with general statistics on levels of production at a national level. The typical source of commentary used to demonstrate the advantages enjoyed by milk production in the interwar years has been the writings of the farmer and journalist, A.G. Street. Street farmed in Wiltshire, a county in southern England but one which has generally been accepted as being in the pastoral zone and which was regarded by MAF in a 1927 report into agricultural conditions as being a dairy county.²¹ Brassley uses Street as an example of successful dairy farming.²² Street moved, in 1927, from an arable, 'four-course system allied to a Hampshire Down flock', into milk production both

²¹ NA/MAF/48/75.

²² Brassley, *British Farming*, p.198.

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for local retail purposes and 'dispatch by rail to London'.²³ Street describes using the outdoor bail milking system that Martin sees as having been influential in dairy prosperity in the 1930s.²⁴ Another frequently quoted commentary is *British Agriculture*, written in 1938 by Astor and Rowntree. Wilt quotes Astor and Rowntree who stated in their book that milk was the 'cornerstone' of the agricultural industry by 1938 and saw the Milk Marketing Board (MMB), introduced in 1933, as being the basis of farmers' success, even though they perceived it as acting against the interests of consumers and in need of nationalization.²⁵ Wilt sees the MMB as having been a benefit to farmers by bringing high milk prices whilst Brassley, coincidentally, regards the MMB as having constituted a 'success', with Martin judging that it had brought stability to the milk industry.²⁶

Some statistical evidence has been used to support claims of prosperity in interwar dairy farming made on the basis of contemporary commentary. Astor and Rowntree had provided a statistical justification for their complimentary judgement on the importance of milk production, insofar as they stated that it was 'accounting for over one quarter of the total agricultural output' at the time of writing in 1938.²⁷ Both Brassley and Martin refer to statistical evidence, using the increasing output of milk and numbers of milk cattle in the 1930s to challenge, in Martin's words, 'the conventional view that the decade was a period

²³ Street, *Farmer's Glory*, pp.39, 249, 263, 281.

²⁴ Martin, *Development*, pp.6, 13, 35.

²⁵ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p.251.

²⁶ Brassley, *British Farming*, pp.194-5; Wilt, A.F., *Food for War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.50; Brassley, 'Output', p.63; Martin, *Development*, pp.24-5.

²⁷ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p.251.

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of unremitting gloom for the agricultural sector'.²⁸ Such evidence is to be found in the *Agricultural Statistics*, for example, the commentary included with the statistics for 1923 states, 'For the third year in succession the dairy herd has been increased', and, 'There was a further increase in the number of cattle during the twelve months ending 4th June 1923'.²⁹ The number of dairy cattle, as the commonly used indicator as to the health of the dairy industry, would be expected to have increased between 1919 and 1939; this is an expectation fulfilled on the national scale, according to the *Agricultural Statistics* which show cows in milk in England as a whole to have increased in number from 1,693,808 to 1,977,224, a considerable increase equal to 17 percent. The logical expectation would be that any prosperity in the dairy industry would have been likely to be enjoyed in counties located within the pastoral region that were renowned in 1919 for dairy farming and that such prosperity would be reflected in the statistical indicators for those counties. The increases may have been the result, either, of expanding herd sizes, or of farmers turning to dairy farming, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters, but this chapter will examine the increases in dairy cattle in relation to two counties renowned for the production of milk on small farms: the West Riding and Lancashire. The reputations enjoyed at the time by both the West Riding of Yorkshire and of Lancashire as dairy farming counties leads to the expectation that they would have enjoyed

²⁸ Brassley, *British Farming*, p.194; Martin, *Development*, pp.6, 13, 35.

²⁹ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics: Report on the Acreage under Crops and the Number of Live Stock in England and Wales, 1923, Volume 58* (London: HMSO, 1923), p.23.

highly prosperous conditions given the considerable expansion of the dairy industry.³⁰

Contemporary sources support the reputation of the West Riding and Lancashire as prominent milk producing counties. R.B. Forrester wrote in one of MAF's *Economic Series* in 1927 of six areas nationally that were seen to consume a large volume of milk, one being the West Riding which was seen to be 'drawing on local supplies', with another, Lancashire, being one of the chief counties for the production and sale of milk.³¹ Both the counties and various locations within them are used frequently as examples of centres of milk production and distribution in these *Economic Series*. The agricultural economist, P. Manning, wrote the contribution on Lancashire to the publication, *Smallholdings Studies*, in 1938, stating plainly, 'Dairy farming in Lancashire has always been one of the chief elements in its agriculture. It is now much the most important.'³² Forrester makes reference to Lancashire towns, such as Preston and Wigan, as well as to the fact that the Lancashire conurbation creates a market so large that some milk from the West Riding was even being sold over the Pennines in Lancashire; this implies the ability of the West Riding to produce large quantities, particularly as Forrester has already noted the considerable demands upon the supply from the West Riding of the county's own cities of Leeds, Bradford and Sheffield.³³ The West Riding town of Hebden

³⁰ Table 3.1; Table 4.1.

³¹ MAF, *Economic Series No.16*, pp.11, 13.

³² Manning, P., 'An Economic Survey of Poultry and Dairy Holdings in Lancashire', in *Smallholdings Studies: Reports of Surveys Undertaken by some Agricultural Economists*, ed. by Viscount Astor and Rowntree, B.S. (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd, 1938), pp.96-107, (p.104).

³³ MAF, *Economic Series No.16*, pp.13, 14.

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Bridge is noted as a supplier of milk to industrial districts in a 1925 *Economic Series* pamphlet on cooperation in agricultural marketing whilst nearby Halifax is used in a 1933 pamphlet as an example of an area of high milk demand that was managing self-sufficiently.³⁴ The West Riding's *Huddersfield Daily Examiner* carried a feature in August 1933, 'A Day's Work on the Farm', which states plainly, 'All the farms round here are smallholdings and dairy farms.'³⁵ The status of the two industrial Pennines counties as centres of dairy production is cemented by statistics that show that 12.5 percent of the total number of cows in milk in England were to be found in the combined herds of the West Riding and Lancashire in 1919.³⁶

Table 4.1 Acreage under Crops and Grass, Acreage of Arable Land, and Numbers of Dairy Cattle: Yorkshire West Riding 1919-1939*			
	1919	1939	Change 1919-1939
Total Acreage of Crops and Grass	1149611	1027380	-122231
Acreage Under Arable Cultivation	410916	293185	-117731
Numbers of Dairy Cattle	94936	100484	5548

*Sources: MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Table 3 (pp.20-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Table 2 (pp.10-23).

The 17 percent national rise in numbers of milking cows and the insistence in recent work upon the existence of encouraging interwar conditions for farms in milk production might lead to the conclusion that the agricultural

³⁴ MAF, *Economic Series No.38*, p.28; Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Economic Series No.5: Report on the Co-operative Purchase of Agricultural Requisites* (London: HMSO, 1925), p.30.

³⁵ *Huddersfield Daily Examiner*, 8 August 1933.

³⁶ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Table 3 (pp.20-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Table 2 (pp.10-23).

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area in the West Riding and Lancashire might have expanded, but this is not borne out by statistics. The West Riding actually saw shrinkage of the area under its crops and grass of more than 10.5 percent whilst Lancashire's agriculture lost over 13 percent of its land; however, neither of these statistics is necessarily indicative of a decline in dairy farming in the two counties. Evidence is available of land being sacrificed to increased intensity of dairy farming in parts of England between the Wars in a system whereby imported feedstuffs were given to milking cows. The use of imported feedstuffs was widespread in the West Riding and was commented upon by G.C.A. Robertson who noted in 1928 the large quantities bought in on small farms in the county³⁷ whilst Fletcher concludes that it was the low prices of imported feed that contributed most significantly to any success to be found on farms on the uplands of East Lancashire.³⁸ The increased intensity of dairy farming involved the abandonment of the most marginal land whilst some pasture became classified as 'rough grazing', to be used simply as a means of occasional supplementary feed³⁹ and for exercising animals.⁴⁰ The consequence was that the West Riding saw a 38 percent increase in its acreage of rough grazing and Lancashire 32 percent.⁴¹

The national expansion of the dairy herd would suggest the possibility that new farms may have been created in the West Riding and Lancashire of the small sizes often associated with dairy farming and that numbers of farms of less

³⁷ Robertson, p.58.

³⁸ Fletcher, 'Economic Development', Summary [no pn. in Summary].

³⁹ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p.54.

⁴⁰ Martin, *Development*, pp.13-14.

⁴¹ Table 3.2; Table 4.1.

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than 50 acres might have increased. An actual increase in numbers did take place in the category of the very smallest farms - of less than five acres - in Lancashire but this was due to the poultry keeping that was a success in the county during the interwar years; Rowell wrote on the poultry industry in

Table 4.2 Acreage under Crops and Grass, Acreage of Arable Land, and Numbers of Dairy Cattle: Lancashire 1919-1939*			
	1919	1939	Change 1919-1939
Total Acreage of Crops and Grass	780268	677164	-103104
Acreage Under Arable Cultivation	296840	181474	-115366
Numbers of Dairy Cattle	116457	128568	12111

*Sources: MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919*, Vol.54, Table 3 (pp.20-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939*, Vol.74, Table 2 (pp.10-23).

Lancashire in 1933 in the MAF journal, *Agriculture*, noting, 'The unit aimed at for a poultry holding is from three to five acres.'⁴² The expansion of poultry holdings has the potential to disguise any decreases in dairy farm numbers in the northern counties.⁴³ The increase in Lancashire's smallest holdings is accounted for by a rapid expansion of the poultry and egg industry in the county, made possible by the same cheap imported feed available to pastoral farmers, a success story replicated to some degree in the West Riding;⁴⁴ examples of schemes set up for smallholders to raise poultry on plots of as little as half an acre at locations such as Maghull in Lancashire and Castleford in the

⁴² Rowell, C.W., 'Small Poultry Holdings in Lancashire', *Agriculture: Journal of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries*, 40, (1933), 816-822, (p.817).

⁴³ Howkins, 'Death and Rebirth?', p.13.

⁴⁴ Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Economic Series No.10; Report on Egg Marketing in England and Wales* (London: HMSO, 1926), p.92.

West Riding are to be found in MAF documents.⁴⁵ Any apparent increases or stability in farm numbers attributable to the creation of poultry holdings might erroneously be thought to reflect prosperity amongst small dairy farmers and increases in their numbers.

Imaginary increases in small dairy farm numbers such as those resulting actually from expansion of poultry farming might be thought to have involved, where possible, expansion onto land on the margins of the existing agricultural area but this inference is undermined by the shrinkage of the agricultural areas of the West Riding and Lancashire and by the expansion of rough grazing, mentioned above; however, this is not to say that new small dairy farms may not have been created anyway. Farm creation would have been possible by means other than simple expansion of the total agricultural area, including by way of a similar operation of the fragmentation of large farms to the one undertaken by A.G. Street at the point that he turned to dairy farming, noted above.⁴⁶ Fragmentation would have created the smaller units that were regarded as being most compatible with dairy farming. One common way for farms to have been fragmented into multiple holdings was as part of the scheme for the resettlement of servicemen on County Council smallholdings after the First World War, some of which were advocated as becoming dairy farms, notably by landowner Christopher Turnor.⁴⁷ The news journal, *Land and Liberty*, noted in January 1927 that arable farms used for growing potatoes during the

⁴⁵ NA/MAF/48/104.

⁴⁶ This chapter, above.

⁴⁷ NA/MAF/48/26, *Departmental Committee appointed by the President of the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries to consider the Settlement or Employment on the Land in England and Wales of Discharged Sailors and Soldiers; Introduction and Final Report, 1916; Minutes of Evidence.*

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War had been bought up at high prices after it for conversion to smallholdings⁴⁸ and potatoes had been commonly grown in West Lancashire on farms, such as on the Speke Estate.⁴⁹ The acquisition of large farms for breaking up into smallholdings is typified by the purchase by the Ministry of Agriculture of the Guy's Hospital Estate in Lincoln-Holland, whereby over 6,000 acres were bought which had formerly made up 20 farms, eight of which were over 300 acres in size and five of which were over 200 acres with only one under 50 acres.⁵⁰ Considerable numbers of smallholdings had been created in Lancashire and the West Riding in this way, all of which, it can be assumed, would still have been in existence in 1939 since there is no evidence of any national policy of dismantling or offloading them during the interwar years other than through sales to tenants which numbered less than 1,000 in total, nationally.⁵¹ The sales were driven by the ideology of the creation of petty private property that abounded in the Conservative Party⁵² and would, anyway, have left the owner-occupied holdings to contribute to total numbers of farms; in 1932, Lancashire had 428 smallholdings and the West Riding, 548.⁵³

Any new dairy farms, whether created as part of Government policy or otherwise, would have been able to be let 'readily', according to a MAF report into the extent of agricultural depression in 1927, whilst the opposite was true of arable farms, especially of 'very large farms comprising a considerable area of

⁴⁸ *Land and Liberty*, January 1927.

⁴⁹ Mutch, A., 'Paternalism and Class on the Speke Estate, 1870-1914', in *Rural Social Change and Conflicts since 1500*, ed. by Charlesworth, A. (Hull: Conference of Regional and Local Historians, 1982), pp.108-24, (p.112); Mutch, 'Rural Society', p.24.

⁵⁰ NA/MAF/48/330.

⁵¹ NA/MAF/48/104.

⁵² NA/D/4/8, *Committee on Agricultural Credit, 1922*.

⁵³ Smith, N.R., *Land*, pp.234-6.

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arable land'.⁵⁴ The same report stated, 'There is demand for small farms everywhere' and, 'The demand for small farms is distinctly good', and pointed to ongoing difficulties on the kind of arable farm that might be broken up to form smaller dairy holdings: 'Arable farmers occupying over 300 acres are generally speaking, in the most difficult position and there is a noticeable tendency for such men to reduce their liabilities by taking smaller farms.' Farms of over 300 acres in size saw a net fall in England of fourteen percent between 1919 and 1939, equal in proportion to the overall fall in farm numbers but much higher than figures for farms of 50 to 300 acres. Declining numbers of the largest farms, when seen in the light of the desire of farmers for smaller farms, are consistent with the notion that farms were being created to fulfil demand, at least during the 1920s as detailed in the 1927 MAF report; a 1926 MAF report confirms the existence of this demand by demonstrating that purchase prices for small farms were relatively high, agricultural land being expected on average to command about 22 years' purchase whilst, 'Small farms, and accommodation land, for which a spirited competition is still usually found, will make 24-25 years purchase.'⁵⁵ New small farms might well be dairy farms, a suggestion consistent with the consequent facility to buy the necessary livestock with money saved on rent or gained in equity from downsizing.

Prosperity in dairying in conjunction with the apparent fragmentation of large farms into smaller holdings well suited to dairying and thus to a growth in farm numbers might lead to the expectation that farm numbers in dairy counties

⁵⁴ NA/MAF/48/75.

⁵⁵ NA/MAF/48/74, *Method of Arriving at the Capital Value of Agricultural Land, 1926*.

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would have contradicted the national trend for decreases and remained stable or even have increased, in spite of the overall falls in the counties' agricultural acreage. Even the national expansion of milk production might raise the expectation of stability or increase in farm numbers in the West Riding and Lancashire, especially as small farms had continued to be popular in the north in

Table 4.3 Numbers of Farms in Large and Small Size Categories in Yorkshire West Riding 1919-1939*							
	Number of Holdings						
	Year	1919	1931	Change 1919-1931	1939	Change 1931-1939	Change 1919-1939
<i>Farm Size</i>							
1-5 acres		4465	3747	-718	3016	-731	-1449
5-20 acres		7886	6518	-1368	5563	-955	-2323
20-50 acres		5189	4609	-580	4255	-354	-934
1-50 acres		17540	14874	-2666	12834	-2040	-4706
50 acres and above		6530	6298	-232	6266	-32	-264
All Farms		24070	21172	-2898	19100	-2072	-4970

* Sources: MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919*, Vol.54, Table 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1931*, Vol.66, Table 8 (pp.64-5); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939*, Vol.74, Table 11 (pp.38-9).

the early and mid-1920s, according to MAF.⁵⁶ The surprise is that farm numbers fell considerably in both northern dairy counties between 1919 and 1939. The fall was higher in the West Riding which saw a net fall of over 20.5 percent, a figure considerably higher than the, already sizeable, national average net fall in farm numbers of 14 percent. The net fall in the West Riding was actually higher also than the calculated national gross rate of fall of 18 percent. Lancashire saw a net fall of almost 17 percent in farms of over five acres in size. Falls in numbers of farms are surprising given the strength of the dairy industry in the

⁵⁶ NA/MAF/48/75.

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West Riding and Lancashire. The great dairying reputations and the extensive herds of the two counties might lead to the assumption that the two counties would have played a significant part in the expansion of the national dairy herd between the Wars and, indeed, falls in farm numbers were not matched by decreases in numbers of dairy cattle. Both counties saw overall increases in the size of their dairy herds in the period between 1919 and 1939. Increases in the numbers of milking cows occurred although neither county saw anything as dramatic as the 17 percent increase across England. Lancashire's percentage increase was 10 and actual numbers went up from 116,457 to 128,568, whilst the West Riding's increases were remarkably small, in the circumstances, showing numbers of milking cows up from 94,936 to 100,484, an increase equal to only 6 percent.⁵⁷

Table 4.4 Numbers of Farms in Large and Small Size Categories in Lancashire 1919-1939*							
Farm Size	Number of Holdings						
	Year	1919	1931	Change 1919-1931	1939	Change 1931-1939	Change 1919-1939
1-5 acres		2519	2966	447	3190	224	671
5-20 acres		5306	4537	-769	4094	-443	-1212
20-50 acres		5382	4718	-664	4393	-325	-989
1-50 acres		13207	12221	-986	11677	-544	-1530
50 acres and above		5210	4907	-303	4740	-167	-470
All Farms		18417	17128	-1289	16417	-711	-2000

* Sources: MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919*, Vol.54, Table 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1931*, Vol.66, Table 8 (pp.64-5); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939*, Vol.74, Table 11 (pp.38-9).

⁵⁷ Table 4.1; Table 4.2 and *Sources; Table 4.3 and *Sources; Table 4.4 and *Sources.

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Falls in numbers of northern counties' farms would appear to be inconsistent with increases in the numbers of milking cows in the West Riding and Lancashire, relatively small though the increases may have been in national terms, and with prosperity in dairy farming overall. The explanation for farm disappearance lies, quite significantly and almost paradoxically, in the very expansion of dairy farming itself. Winstanley has shown that opportunities had presented themselves for small farms to flourish and to supply fresh milk to local industrial populations in the late nineteenth century, including in Lancashire and the West Riding, and it might be expected that this would have continued in the interwar period.⁵⁸ The interwar expansion of dairy farming in England which, it has been noted, is demonstrated by the 17 percent national increase in dairy cattle numbers, took place in very different conditions to those prevailing before the First World War, being accompanied by the entry of larger scale arable farmers into the dairy market. A tendency for an interwar switch by farmers from arable to pastoral agriculture is confirmed by the *Lincoln and Boston Guardian* in January 1931 which carried an article entitled, 'The Change to Grass'. The newspaper made reference to 'a writer in *The Times* who says that steadily England is being converted to grassland', continuing, 'Unless steps are taken to put wheat growing on a reasonably profitable basis, he says we must expect a more rapid drift from arable farming.'⁵⁹ There is further evidence to demonstrate that the fall in the arable acreage in England was due to farms and farmland being switched into dairying, thereby increasing the competition for existing small dairy farmers. Douet, Taylor and Chapman have all noted a

⁵⁸ Winstanley, p.175.

⁵⁹ *Lincoln and Boston Guardian*, 10 January 1931.

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tendency for farmers to move from arable into dairy farming during the interwar period.⁶⁰ An investigation of land values of 1926 had noted the development of conditions whereby conversion of farms from large arable holdings to dairy had been likely, stating, 'Today large farms are almost unsaleable, whilst medium sized farms comprising a large proportion of arable land fetch only about 20 years purchase.'⁶¹ Henry Willett was clearly acquainted with farmers turning to dairy farming; Willett had said in 1933 at the annual meeting of the British Friesian Society, 'that "farmers were so accustomed to their bank balances being on the wrong side that they were more than surprised to find that any venture connected with farming (e.g. dairy farming) was able to pay its way"'.⁶²

The reality appears to have been that farmers who had previously been dedicated to arable farming were entering the fresh milk market; this was occurring by as early as 1923 when *The Dairy World and the British Dairy Farmer* stated that '[i]n many districts arable farmers have been driven from their old habit of growing cereal crops by the extremely low prices during past years to dairy farming as the only way in which they could live.'⁶³ Jolly's judgement that the dairy herd had become by the early 1930s the 'most important enterprise' on many arable farms⁶⁴ is one with which Fletcher concurs.⁶⁵ Increased competition from arable farmers entering the milk market caused milk prices to fall and caused some farm businesses ultimately to fail leading to the disappearance of farms. The development by arable farmers of

⁶⁰ Douet, pp.86, 190-5; Taylor, D., pp.62-3; Chapman, p.286.

⁶¹ NA/MAF/48/74.

⁶² Brackets in original. Stanford, pp.121-2.

⁶³ *Dairy World and the British Dairy Farmer*, 17 December 1923.

⁶⁴ Jolly, A.L., 'Milk Producer-Retailers' Profits', *Farm Economist*, 1, (1933-5), 163-5, (p.163).

⁶⁵ Fletcher, 'Economic Development', p.219.

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part or all of their business as milk production might be expected to have required the conversion of a portion of arable farms to grazing land. The fall in the arable acreage experienced nationally would certainly be expected to have extended to dairy counties, despite these counties having had a smaller arable acreage than those in the arable region in the first place. The arable acreage in the West Riding and Lancashire did indeed undergo a significant decline during the interwar period. Lancashire, which had 38 percent of its agricultural area in arable in 1919, witnessed a fall of 115,366 acres or 39 percent in its arable acreage by 1939. The arable decrease in the West Riding, where arable land made up 36 percent of farmland in 1919, was of 117,731 acres or 29 percent. The expectation might arise that evidence of the movement of arable farmers into dairy production would be provided by statistics showing an expansion in the acreage of grazing land to accompany the decrease in arable land nationally of 26 percent. The decline in the arable acreage was not matched by substantial increase in grazing land in the northern dairy counties, however; in actuality, the West Riding's permanent grass declined negligibly from 738,695 acres in 1919 to 734,196 in 1939 whilst Lancashire saw only a small increase from 483,428 acres to 495,690 over the same period.⁶⁶

The failure of the grazing acreage to expand despite the conversion of arable farms to dairy farming is explicable. Grigg has noted that there may have taken place considerable erroneous categorization of the temporary grass associated with arable farming as 'rough grazing' in the interwar *Agricultural*

⁶⁶ Table 4.1; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Table 3 (pp.20-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Table 2 (pp.10-23).

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Statistics;⁶⁷ there is little reason to suppose that such a process would not have extended to arable land that had been converted to grass for dairy cattle on farms formerly devoted to arable farming. Arable farmers who took on a dairy herd and used some former arable land as grass but designated it as rough grazing would have been contributing to the actual contraction of the national or regional arable acreage; however, by failing to show the concurrent increase in grassland, they would not have demonstrated the true extent of increased pastoral farming and, furthermore, such behaviour would have artificially exaggerated the fall in the total acreage of crops and grass. The expansion of rough grazing in Lancashire by 34,181 acres, or 32 percent, and the West Riding by 93,921, or 38 percent, compensated somewhat for the fall in the arable acreage noted in the foregoing paragraph and for the falls in acreages of crops and grass noted previously, the conversion of arable land taking place for use as grazing for dairy cattle but with some of the land being designated as rough grazing. Some arable land may, indeed, have fallen genuinely into the category of 'rough grazings' because, as has been noted above, cheap imported feedstuffs were available as a substitute for fresh grass and hay and some land would become surplus to requirements as a result.⁶⁸

A good indication of the survival and growth of large arable farms which were acquiring dairy herds and entering the milk market would be overall increases in average farm size; such increases occurred in both the West Riding and Lancashire between 1919 and 1939. Indeed, the evidence seen and noted

⁶⁷ Grigg, 'Farm Size', p.182.

⁶⁸ This chapter, above; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Table 3 (pp.20-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Table 2 (pp.10-23).

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of the adoption of dairy systems by arable farmers suggests strongly that the disappearance of 26 percent of the arable acreage in England between the Wars should not generate automatically the assumption that falls in the arable acreage translate simply into arable farmers going out of business, especially in those northern counties scrutinised so far, here. The pattern for the conversion of farms and land from arable to milk production had been occurring in the South Rossendale area, to the north of Bury in East Lancashire, during the late nineteenth century, according to Hamilton,⁶⁹ and the reputation of Lancashire as a centre of milk production gives no reason to believe that this would not have continued in the interwar years. Whilst the average size of farms of over five acres in extent in Lancashire increased by 2 acres, or just over 4 percent, from 48.5 to 50.5 acres, average farm size in the West Riding increased between 1919 and 1939 from just below 48 acres to almost 54, an increase of over 12.5 percent.⁷⁰ Large farm survival and growth is indicated by these increases in average farm size which were occurring despite the disappearance of substantial numbers of farms, as noted. Arable farms had been, traditionally, larger than dairy farms in pastoral counties, just as they were in the arable region,⁷¹ so increases in farm size suggest that land from failing small farms was being used to enlarge farms formerly specialising in arable production. The disappearance of significant numbers of farms appears to have resulted only in small amounts of land being removed per farm from the overall recorded acreage resulting in

⁶⁹ Hamilton, S., 'The Historical Geography of South Rossendale, 1780-1900' (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Manchester, 1974), pp.180, 188.

⁷⁰ Table 3.2.

⁷¹ Mutch, 'Paternalism', pp.113, 121; Chapman, p.197; Long, W.H., *A Survey of the Agriculture of Yorkshire (County Agricultural Surveys, No.6)* (London: Royal Agricultural Society of England, 1969), p.63.

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increases in average farm size which are suggestive of the survival of the larger arable farms but with the likelihood that they would have continued mainly as dairy holdings. Guymer has commented upon the amalgamation of farms to create bigger holdings in East Lancashire's Rossendale area between 1900 and 1965 and upon the use of farm buildings for non-agricultural purposes, indicating that the assimilation of land from failed farms into expanding holdings was taking place.⁷² The decrease of the total acreage of crops and grass alongside the increase in the area of rough grazing in Lancashire and the West Riding suggests that some, but not all, of the land released from disappearing farms was being used to augment or maintain the acreage of existing arable farms as part of a switch to dairying; concurrently, some land was being reassigned as rough grazing, particularly in the West Riding.⁷³

Rough grazing has not been included thus far in the calculation of average farm size but the possibility that some farmland was erroneously designated as rough grazing makes its inclusion in a calculation of average farm size of some relevance. A figure for Lancashire's average farm size acreage inclusive of rough grazing is somewhat speculative due to the high incidence of poultry farming and egg production on farms of fewer than five acres in size which would have required little land but indicates that farms grew quite significantly; calculations show that average size of farms of over five acres in size, inclusive of rough grazing, rose by 14 percent between 1919 and 1939, increasing from just over 55 acres to 63 acres. The average size of West Riding

⁷² Guymer, A.G., 'The Agricultural Geography of Rossendale' (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Manchester, 1965), p.83.

⁷³ Table 3.2.

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farms increased by 23.5 percent, expanding from 58 acres to 71.5 acres when calculations include rough grazing. The statistical data observed that shows increases in average farm size at this point implies that small farms were more likely to fail than larger ones in the established dairy counties of the West Riding and Lancashire, whilst the evidence on expanding herd size and from general written histories and interwar contemporary sources, noted above, suggests that arable farmers in these counties would have been turning successfully to dairy farming on their larger acreages.⁷⁴

Data on the actual sizes of disappearing farms can be analysed for confirmation of the tendency for small farms in northern dairy counties to disappear at a disproportionately high rate between 1919 and 1939. Farms of fewer than 50 acres in extent in the West Riding saw a net fall in their numbers of 4,706, equal to 27 percent or over 1 in 4, whilst numbers in Lancashire of farms of between five and 50 acres can be seen to have fallen by 2201, meaning that 20.5 percent of them or 1 in 5 ceased to operate. Large numbers of farms of less than 50 acres in extent were engaged in the production of milk in the two northern counties between the Wars. J.J. Green commented in his *Agriculture in Lancashire* of 1929 of the farms in East Lancashire being 'small and almost invariably developed for milk production'⁷⁵ whilst MAF reports noted the small scale of dairy farms in the West Riding, commenting on the milk farms in the Calder Valley which were of an average size of 20 to 25 acres.⁷⁶ Huxtable wrote of fresh milk production as 'perhaps the most extensive single department of

⁷⁴ This chapter, above; Table 3.2; Table 4.1; Table 4.3; Table 4.4.

⁷⁵ Fletcher, 'Economic Development', p.213.

⁷⁶ MAF, *Economic Series No.5*, p.30.

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farming in Yorkshire' and that 'small holdings' on the fringes of towns were heavily concentrated,⁷⁷ 'small holdings' being a term used to define farms of under 50 acres in size.⁷⁸

The prevalence of small-scale producers in the two northern counties is demonstrated by the number of producer retailers in operation selling milk directly to customers; the small scale of farms of producer retailers is demonstrated by their constituting 40 percent of registered producers of the Milk Marketing Board in 1935 but producing only 17 percent of the milk for liquid consumption, with many farming as few as four cows.⁷⁹ Fletcher notes that 200 producer retailers were working in the Preston area, alone,⁸⁰ and Forrester commented upon Wigan and Preston as centres of producer retailing of milk and upon a 'feature' of the West Riding being that 'it is fed mainly by local supplies' whilst a MAF report on markets and fairs noted that milk was 'sold direct to consumers' in the West Riding.⁸¹ The weekly newspaper, *Milk Producer Retailer*, demonstrated that its audience was made up substantially of small farmers in its edition of October 1935, writing of the ongoing political danger to 'the small man'⁸² which included the 'occupants of these small grass farms in the Pennines who have been in the past peaceful and content to carry on their small

⁷⁷ Huxtable, F.R., 'Farming in Yorkshire', *Transactions of the Yorkshire Agricultural Society*, 82, (1924), 26-39, (p.27).

⁷⁸ Venn, 1923, *Foundations*, p.23.

⁷⁹ Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Economic Series No.44; Milk – Report of the Reorganization Commission for Great Britain* (London: HMSO, 1935), pp.17-19, 142.

⁸⁰ Fletcher, 'Economic Development', p.191.

⁸¹ Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Economic Series No.19; Markets and Fairs in England and Wales* (London: HMSO, 1928), p.52; MAF, *Economic Series No.16*, pp.13-14.

⁸² *Milk Producer Retailer*, 31 October 1935; *Milk Producer Retailer*, 7 November 1935.

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businesses in the age-old way.⁸³ MAF documents from 1935 reveal that many producer retailers wishing to join the MMB were farming four cows or fewer and that some had been retailing less than a gallon of milk per day⁸⁴ whilst Manning noted that the farms of eleven to 17.5 acres that he had visited in Lancashire in 1938, 'usually belong to the retail producer.'⁸⁵ The comparison of the fates of the small farms characterised by the presence of milk producer retailers with larger farms is stark. Lancashire farms of more than 50 acres in size witnessed losses that ran at 9 percent over the period from 1919 to 1939, a rate of loss of less than half that of the county's small farms, whilst the comparison in the West Riding was even more striking with the rate of disappearance of farms sized at over 50 acres being only 4 percent, less than a sixth of that of the county's small farms.⁸⁶

The assumption can also be made that the actual numerical decline of small farms in the West Riding and Lancashire across the interwar period must have been higher than in much of the rest of the country since small farms were so prevalent in these two counties. Note should be taken of the proportion of the total number of farms that was made up by farms of one to 50 acres in the two counties under observation. The proportion of small farms making up the total of farms in England in 1919 was 64.5 whilst the same farm-size group made up 71.5 percent of farms in Lancashire and 73 percent in the West Riding; therefore, not only did a larger proportion of the small farms in existence in the

⁸³ *Milk Producer Retailer*, 24 October 1935.

⁸⁴ MAF, *Economic Series No. 44*, pp.141-2.

⁸⁵ Manning, p.104.

⁸⁶ Table 4.1; Table 4.2; Table 4.3; Table 4.4.

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two counties disappear but small farms made up a larger proportion of the total number of disappearing farms in Lancashire and the West Riding than was the case in the country as a whole.

The Milk Market in England, 1920 to 1933

The writers of the twenty-first century historiography have justified their claims that dairy farming was successful between the Wars by pointing to increases in output that took place in the dairy farming sector, as a whole, over the period; however, statistics on small farm failure in the West Riding and Lancashire show that success was by no means guaranteed for all farmers operating in the dairy field. The mixed success in the dairying counties and the disproportionately high incidence of failure of small farms shown by statistics for England as a whole give rise to the suggestion that varying fortunes may have been experienced in dairy production elsewhere, a suggestion to which evidence on conditions in the milk market between 1920 and 1933 lend support.

The Grigg Commission, ordered in 1932 to investigate the potential reorganization of the milk market, had pointed to the intense competition in the market⁸⁷ and evidence shows that dairy farmers were affected by falling prices. The increased dairy production that occurred during the 1920s was not being driven by an increase in consumption of fresh milk⁸⁸ but by an increase in supply from farmers moving into the dairy industry to take advantage of the price of

⁸⁷ Baker, p.77.

⁸⁸ MAF, *Economic Series No.16*, p.118.

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milk which, though it remained high until 1929 when compared with other agricultural produce,⁸⁹ had been falling gradually since 1922.⁹⁰ The committee, established by MAF's forerunner, the Board of Agriculture, to assess the possibility of settling discharged servicemen on the land after the First World War, was well aware of the potential for the expansion of milk production:

Milk is one of the few articles of which the home producer has a practical monopoly, and it cannot be doubted that for some years past the supply has not kept pace with the demand. At present there is an abnormal shortage owing to the lack of labour and transport difficulties, but even in normal times it is sometimes the case that cottagers and other residents in the rural districts find difficulty in obtaining a sufficient supply of milk for their own needs, owing to the fact that all milk produced on the large farms is sent away to the towns.⁹¹

Farmers clearly understood the potential for expanding their supply, one such being W.S. Abbott, a good example of a large-scale farmer who moved into dairying between the Wars in order to increase his lines of production on his farm of 580 acres between Peterborough and Stanford. Abbott's admission that he suffered a 'slight recession in the early thirties' that was associated with the introduction of dairying is indicative of the adverse conditions that were affecting all dairy farmers at this time but which would have affected specialist small milk producers much more badly than those large farmers who were supplementing

⁸⁹ Taylor, D., p.62.

⁹⁰ Whetham, *Agrarian History*, pp.147-8.

⁹¹ NA/MAF/48/26.

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arable farming with dairy herds, such as Abbott.⁹² Indeed, the difficult conditions for small-scale farmers resulted from the entry into dairying of such large-scale farmers but this had a knock-on effect in the competition generated amongst small-scale farmers themselves and, in the nature of competition, a reactive effect on large-scale farmers. The Reorganization Commission for Milk, charged with preparing the dairy industry for centralised distribution under the Marketing Acts of 1931 and 1933, had recognised the general tendency amongst producer retailers to undercut one another in offering low prices to consumers, squeezing their own profit margins in the process. *The Home Farmer* wrote of the rampant undercutting that had been practised before the advent of the Milk Marketing Board, of which it was the journal.⁹³ Such undercutting would have driven down the prices other distributors and retailers could ask consumers to pay, squeezing their profits and, as a consequence, reducing the prices they would be prepared to pay to farmers for milk.⁹⁴

No regulation of prices paid to farmers for milk existed after 1920 although the NFU and the National Federation of Dairymen's Associations negotiated recommended yearly prices between 1922 and 1932⁹⁵ through the Permanent Joint Milk Committee, with the NFU making great play of its role in protecting dairy farmers.⁹⁶ The reality was that no recommendation made by the Committee was binding on either the farmer or the distributor⁹⁷ and that

⁹² Abbott, W.S., 'Farming since the First World War', *Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 12 4, (1957), 404-415, (pp.404-7).

⁹³ *The Home Farmer*, May 1934.

⁹⁴ MAF, *Economic Series No.38*, p.28.

⁹⁵ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p.272.

⁹⁶ *NFU Record*, June 1925.

⁹⁷ Baker, p.60.

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contracts made by distributors with milk farmers were often to buy milk at prices much lower than those recorded as having been the prevailing ones at the time⁹⁸ by reference to the Committee's records, such as in the estimates of Astor and Rowntree.⁹⁹ The Grigg Commission of 1932 recognised that producers were at the mercy of distributors when negotiating the prices they were to be paid, saying, 'the financial position of many milk producers is at present so weak, and their dependence on the liquid market so complete, that they cannot afford the risk of failure to obtain a contract.'¹⁰⁰ The expansion of numbers of dairy cattle in England shown in the Agricultural Statistics would appear to contradict evidence on falling prices and to suggest that prices were high enough to encourage the expansion of production but the reality would have been that falling prices meant that producers would have had to expand their production virtually continually merely to maintain their levels of financial return. The consequences of the competition had been falls in prices which affected profit margins for small producers to the point from which, as the statistics for the interwar period show, they could no longer continue farming.

Problems for small farmers caused by falling prices during the 1920s became more obvious when they were exacerbated by the entry of new, large-scale competitors after events in 1929. Milk was used in two ways, either to be retailed for liquid consumption or to be manufactured into dairy products, such as butter and cheese. The collapse of world cheese prices in 1929 began a fall

⁹⁸ Whetham, *Agrarian History*, p.147.

⁹⁹ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p.273.

¹⁰⁰ Baker, p.77.

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in prices for manufacturing milk which reached very low levels by 1931.¹⁰¹ Large-scale producers in the process of expansion would have found themselves with surpluses of milk for which, according to the prices in their contracts which were agreed yearly on the basis of the previous year's levels of production, they would previously have received the price negotiated for manufacturing milk which had been only slightly lower than for liquid milk before 1929. The collapse in prices for manufacturing milk caused distributors to change the way of calculating the manufacturing price, to the detriment of the producers.¹⁰²

The change in calculation methods resulted in falls in the prices paid for manufacturing milk. The change encouraged many farmers operating in counties where both farms and dairy herds were large to abandon their contracts and to enter into the liquid milk market where prices were initially unaffected, sending milk to city railway terminals for sale for the liquid market, taking their chances with prices which fluctuated daily.¹⁰³ Astor and Rowntree point to farmers in the western counties, such as Gloucestershire and Devon, entering into the liquid milk market in this way, sending their milk to London.¹⁰⁴ The report of the Reorganization Commission for Milk stated that producer retailers, whose numbers have been shown to be constituted disproportionately of small farmers, were tending to operate more on the fringes of the urban areas and less in the centre, when it was written in 1933; this suggests that the markets of the local producers were being squeezed by distributors selling milk

¹⁰¹ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p.273.

¹⁰² Baker, p.61.

¹⁰³ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p.273.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

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arriving from outside the immediate districts.¹⁰⁵ Venn noted in 1923 that midlands farmers had been sacrificing their grain acreages to the production of fresh produce to convey to urban districts since the end of the nineteenth century and that latterly they had turned to supplying milk to these areas.¹⁰⁶ By 1930, virtually all the urban, industrial areas were being supplied with milk for the liquid market from counties other than those in which they were situated; London was supplied from as far away as Staffordshire.¹⁰⁷ The nature of the problem affecting producer retailers was the same for small farmers who were not specifically direct retailers, as references to them from the time attest; the trade journal, *Milk Producer Retailer*, is replete with references to 'small dairymen and producer retailers', 'the small man' and 'the ordinary small producer retailer'.¹⁰⁸

Smaller farmers as well as producer retailers, a large proportion of whom it has been shown were small-scale farmers, had specialised in the production of milk for liquid consumption in local markets in which they had formerly enjoyed protection as a result of the perishability of their product. Producer retailers, in particular, had commonly been supposed to have enjoyed significant benefits from having their own rounds compared to farmers who sold their milk wholesale, according to the agricultural economist A.L. Jolly, writing in the early 1930s. Jolly was sceptical about the general understanding that these benefits were substantial and saw the existence of such benefits to be somewhat limited,

¹⁰⁵ MAF, *Economic Series No.38*, p.28.

¹⁰⁶ Venn, 1923, *Foundations*, pp.319-20.

¹⁰⁷ Taylor, D., p.63.

¹⁰⁸ *Milk Producer Retailer*, November 1935.

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if not illusory. Jolly enumerated several factors that cut into the additional profit margin that he saw as being commonly supposed to pertain to the producer retailer, including the expense of delivery and of giving customers generous measures, the cost of equipment in the form of vans and bottles and the cost of labour paid for looking after and sterilising the equipment. Other additional costs to the producer retailer were incurred through the need to maintain a 'level delivery', that is, to ensure an adequate milk supply for the delivery round; the purchase of concentrates in order to overfeed the cattle sometimes resulted in low price sales of surplus milk, but the buying of milk at higher prices from other farms to supply the milk round's orders at times of a shortage of supply from the producer retailer's own herd was also a common necessity.¹⁰⁹

Producer retailers and other local farmers had already been feeling the competition from those larger scale farmers who had taken advantage of improved motor transport after the First World War to bring milk to local markets as well as from milk brought in to urban centres by rail.¹¹⁰ These markets would now have been awash with milk from the new sources of large-scale competition. Prices fell between 1929 and 1933 as the surplus supply of milk to the liquid market increased so that, by 1932, there was, according to Whetham, 'chaos in the trade'.¹¹¹ The only recourse for farmers appeared to be to vote in favour of a central agency for the organization of the production and distribution of milk which would result in the creation in 1933 of the Milk Marketing Board. The issue of a central agency only arose because of the self-inflicted suffering of

¹⁰⁹ Jolly, pp.163-5.

¹¹⁰ This chapter, above.

¹¹¹ Whetham, *Agrarian History*, p.250.

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the large-scale farmers, the implications of which will be examined in the next chapter especially in terms of the numbers of small farmers and farms in existence. However, it is important to recognise that small farmers would already have been suffering the piecemeal but enduring effects of the expansion of milk production in the 1920s and that the events between 1929 and 1933 would simply have exaggerated them.

Conclusion

Significant developments took place in the dairy industry between 1920 and 1933 that support the conclusions which have been drawn from the examination so far in this thesis of the statistics on farm size, arable contraction and dairy expansion in the West Riding and Lancashire as well as for England as a whole. Small dairy farms were suffering as a result of arable farmers developing dairy businesses and operating in their markets. Small farm failure demonstrates that success was not universal for dairy farmers between the Wars.

A narrative of decline in arable farming between the First and Second World Wars which is a feature of the historiography from the second half of the twentieth century is accurate insofar as it has correctly identified a fall in the arable acreage across England and Wales as a whole. The obvious assumption to be drawn from this would be that arable farmers would have suffered economic hardship and business failure as a result but this chapter has shown that this was not necessarily the case, as shown by patterns of agricultural

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change in milk producing counties of the industrial north of England, such as the West Riding and Lancashire. The reduction in the arable acreages of these counties was significant and was greater than the national average but was accompanied by an exaggerated rate of disappearance of the small farms that were traditionally known to be dairy farms in the industrial north. Larger farms which were traditionally more likely to have included significant arable acreages did not suffer on any scale close to that of small farms, as demonstrated by their low rate of disappearance and by increases in average farm size. The survival and relative prosperity of larger farms viewed in the light of the increases that took place in the numbers of dairy cattle in these dairy counties indicates a willingness on the part of arable farmers to enter into the market for the production of fresh milk. The move by arable farmers into dairy farming has been shown to be supported by contemporary commentary. Observations made in the twenty-first century historiography upon the interwar period support this interpretation insofar as they identify increases in dairy production but there is no recognition in this work of the decline of small dairy farmers in the north of England that resulted from this process; there has been, until now, no recognition of the tendency for arable farms to change substantially to dairy in the industrial north during the interwar period at all nor upon the exaggerated disappearance of small farmers.

The propensity for arable farms to move into dairying in pastoral counties appears to have had a highly detrimental effect upon the livelihoods of small dairy farmers, taking the experiences of the West Riding and Lancashire as examples, and it is no coincidence that, as a result of their earlier roles as arable

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farms, these newer, more successful, additions to the market for dairy production would have been larger than the existing dairy farms. The case may be that arable farms did not become successful dairy farms but this is unlikely, given the evidence presented here of the disappearance of arable land and of the growth of the average size of farm and of the numbers of dairy cattle, especially seen alongside the significant reductions in numbers of small farms. All the evidence from the West Riding and Lancashire points to the interwar switch from arable to dairy production resulting in the existence of dairy farms that were larger than had theretofore been the case. Given that this farm creation coincided with a significant decline of the arable farming acreage and that farmers were looking to dairy farming for their salvation, the evidence suggests strongly that these farms had previously relied much more heavily on arable production. The data presented leaves little doubt that the interwar period was one during which larger farms were establishing an economic advantage over smaller ones in the dairy industry; the evidence of the decline of small farms alongside the increasing proportions of larger farms in two counties established at the centre of fresh milk production is testament to this process.

The high rates of disappearance of small farms make it obvious that the victims of depressed interwar conditions for arable farmers in the pastoral region were, paradoxically, the small-scale traditional dairy farmers. The 17 percent increase in numbers of dairy cattle in England between 1919 and 1939, taken at face value, suggests that some success could be enjoyed by dairy farmers in the interwar period. Greater examination of the *Agricultural Statistics* in this chapter has shown that, whilst success was possible in dairy farming, so was failure, as

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indicated by the diminishing numbers of small farms in dairy counties. Success in northern counties, such as the West Riding and Lancashire, renowned for their milk production, was possible but was relatively limited, as shown by the below average increases in these counties' dairy herds and the high numbers of farm disappearances.

It remains to be seen whether the pattern that has emerged in the West Riding and Lancashire was repeated elsewhere in the pastoral region, a pattern of disappearance of small dairy farms taking place alongside arable decline and increasing numbers of dairy cattle which indicates the movement of arable farmers into milk production. The increase of 17 percent in the numbers of dairy cattle in England and the obvious difficulties experienced in arable farming also suggest that investigation is required into the possible existence of similar patterns in the arable zone. The limited success of dairy farmers in Lancashire and the West Riding when viewed against statistics for England suggests that increasing prosperity was being enjoyed elsewhere in counties that must have been witnessing above average increases in dairy cattle numbers whilst the evidence presented here demonstrates that any success was likely to be on larger farms.

Chapter 5: The Extent of Distress amongst Small Farms in Interwar England

Introduction

A pattern has been found in the West Riding of Yorkshire and in Lancashire between the Wars whereby small farm disappearance coincided with the expansion of larger farms; it will be the task of Chapter Five to examine whether or not it was replicated elsewhere. The inference can be made from the success of larger farms in these two northern counties which were renowned for their dairy production that increasing prosperity in dairy farming may have been enjoyed by larger farms elsewhere but still within the zone covering the north and west of England known traditionally for pastoral farming. Prosperity may have been enjoyed in dairy production in the western counties of the pastoral zone, such as Gloucestershire and Devon, where farms were considerably larger on average than in the counties of the industrial north, and this will be gauged, initially, by changes in numbers of dairy cattle.

Levels of farm disappearance in the pastoral western counties and the Midlands between 1919 and 1939 will be assessed in order to determine whether small-scale farmers became the victims of over expansion of dairy production by larger farms in counties across England in the way that they appear to have become in the industrial northern counties. Changes in the extent of the arable acreage will also be assessed in order to determine whether the apparent sacrifice of arable crops for dairy herds by larger farmers in the West Riding and Lancashire were replicated elsewhere. Any disproportionately high

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disappearance of small farms occurring simultaneously with arable shrinkage, dairy herd expansion and average farm size increases would tend to confirm the conclusion emerging from the West Riding and Lancashire that small dairy farms were suffering elsewhere as a result of an expansion of dairying activity by large-scale arable farmers. Counties renowned traditionally for their grazing will also be examined using the same criteria as for the dairy counties.

The evidence from the northern dairy counties that arable farmers, who have been considered traditionally to have farmed large acreages, were turning to dairy farming leads to the possibility that success in milk production may also have been enjoyed in the arable zone of the south and east of England where, in general, farms were larger on average even than in the western counties of the pastoral zone and the midlands; this possibility will also be explored in this chapter. Levels of small farm disappearance in the arable zone will also be assessed. Concentrations of small farm disappearance in certain areas and not others may indicate that small farm failure was, perhaps, connected to factors other than or, at least, as well as the increasing competition in the dairy industry from large-scale farmers. Small farm failure in all locations and across major farming types would indicate that it was the scale of farming itself that was the key factor in determining success or failure. One additional possibility that is explored is that the creation of Government funded smallholdings after the First World War has distorted the statistics on small farm disappearance, causing underestimation of the numbers of existing farms that suffered and disappeared between the Wars and ameliorating the apparent effects of changes in the structure of English agriculture.

Prosperity and Distress in Dairy Farming in Pastoral England

Attention will be paid in the following section initially to pastoral counties where farms were generally larger than those so far encountered in the industrial counties of the West Riding and Lancashire. The increases in dairy herd size in the two industrial counties that were found to have taken place in the previous chapter were relatively and surprisingly small given the propensity towards dairying demonstrated by the counties' large numbers of dairy cattle in 1919; a large part of the increases that made up the 17 percent expansion of the dairy cattle numbers in England between 1919 and 1939 must, therefore, have taken place elsewhere.¹

The experience of Gloucestershire, situated in the rural, western region of the pastoral zone with an average farm size in 1919 of 70 acres and with many farms engaged in milk production, showed one fundamental difference to that of the northern, industrial dairy counties. The number of milk cows in Gloucestershire was less than a third of Lancashire's in 1919 but had increased by 1939 to be slightly over two-fifths of it, having grown from 39,901 to 52,822. The increase was of 32 percent and is of considerable significance because of the sharp contrast between its size and the much smaller increases of 6 percent and 10 percent in the West Riding and Lancashire respectively, counties which were known for the high volume of their milk production and their extensive local markets.² Gloucestershire, in common with the West Riding and Lancashire, saw its arable acreage fall and its average farm size rise; the arable

¹ Table 3.1.

² Chapter 4, above.

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acreage decreased by 38 percent whilst at the same time growth in average farm size was considerable at 15 percent, from 70 acres to over 80. There was a fall in Gloucestershire's total number of farms of 13 percent which was just less than the average for the whole of England shown in the *Agricultural Statistics*.³

The significance of the greater increase in herd size in Gloucestershire lies in its occurring where farm size was already more than a third greater than that of the West Riding and Lancashire in 1919, suggesting that larger farms in counties traditionally well known for dairying enjoyed advantages over smaller ones in similarly renowned dairying counties. The significant fall in the arable acreage indicates that arable farmers and those with arable land recognised that larger farms possessed advantages over smaller ones in the production of fresh milk and then acted upon the realization by entering the market as producers. The landowner and agriculturalist Christopher Turnor had been adamant as early as 1916 that at least 25 acres were necessary for a smallholding that would support dairy cattle to be successful⁴ but the agricultural economist, C.S. Orwin, had been highly critical at the time of the recommendation by Turnor that 25 acres was sufficient for the survival of a dairy holding.⁵ The suggestion that this would be something like the very minimum acreage necessary for survival is verified by Martin's use of the observations of contemporary experts. Martin shows that interwar herds with less than 40 or 50 cows were considered too

³ Table 3.2; Table 3.3; Table 4.1; Table 4.3; Table 4.4; Table 5.1; Table 5.2.

⁴ NA/MAF/48/26.

⁵ Orwin, C.S., 'The Small Holdings Craze', *Edinburgh Review*, 223 456, (1916), 337-355.

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small to be efficient in general⁶ and, taking the density of stocking in Lancashire of about 1 cow to every 4 acres of crops and grass in 1919⁷ as an example, the indication is that successful dairy farms would have been the ones of larger and expanding size; these figure suggest that the more successful farms would require to be at least 160 acres in size.

Table 5.1 Acreage under Crops and Grass, Acreage of Arable Land, and Numbers of Dairy Cattle: Gloucestershire 1919-1939*			
	1919	1939	Change 1919-1939
Total Acreage of Crops and Grass	645193	606755	-38438
Acreage Under Arable Cultivation	247504	154572	-92932
Numbers of Dairy Cattle	39901	52822	12921

*Sources: MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919*, Vol.54, Table 3 (pp.20-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939*, Vol.74, Table 2 (pp.10-23).

Statistics consistently show that small farms were disadvantaged, as the 20.5 percent fall in the numbers of farms of one to 50 acres in extent in Gloucestershire between 1919 and 1939 demonstrates, especially when contrasted with the trend of the county's farms of above 50 acres which showed an actual increase in numbers over the interwar period of just over 1 percent. The advantages of larger farms are demonstrated simply enough by the increases of average size at a time when farms were disappearing at a significant rate. Gloucestershire's statistics are demonstrative of the accuracy of the assertion that interwar success was not spread evenly across the dairy

⁶ Martin, *Development*, p.14.

⁷ Fletcher, 'Economic Development' p.198.

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industry and that, in the main, success appears to have been enjoyed more on large farms than small.⁸

Table 5.2 Numbers of Farms in Large and Small Size Categories in Gloucestershire 1919-1939*							
	Number of Holdings						
	Year	1919	1931	Change 1919-1931	1939	Change 1931-1939	Change 1919-1939
<i>Farm Size</i>							
1-5 acres		2461	2117	-344	1828	-289	-633
5-20 acres		2251	2048	-203	1688	-360	-563
20-50 acres		1379	1559	180	1336	-223	-43
1-50 acres		6091	5724	-367	4852	-872	-1239
50 acres and above		3148	3175	27	3186	11	38
All Farms		9239	8899	-340	8038	-861	-1201

* Sources: MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919*, Vol.54, Table 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1931*, Vol.66, Table 8 (pp.64-5); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939*, Vol.74, Table 11 (pp.38-9).

Brassley has noted that Devon, although well known for its dairying, saw alterations in the structure of its production. Production for the fresh milk market rather than for the traditional manufacture of butter began to take place in South Devon whilst the north of the county was converting from a livestock fattening area to one of dairy farming.⁹ Devon's experience is illustrative of the move into dairy farming that was occurring in many parts of England. The choice to move from arable to milk production has already been noted here as having its exemplar in A.G. Street in Wiltshire but it was one that has been shown to have taken place elsewhere. The East Midlands farmer, W.S. Abbott, later president of the Agricultural economics Society, had clearly had to decrease

⁸ Table 5.2.

⁹ Brassley, *British Farming*, p.194.

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the amount of arable on his 580 acre farm when he switched to dairying, using permanent grass and hay grown on the farm to feed the dairy cattle which he introduced in the early 1930s.¹⁰ The successful production of fresh milk by farmers in counties previously not well known for it has been identified as having been common between the Wars and resulted partly from rapidly developing road transport allowing for the supply of fresh milk to markets at greater distances from farms than previously.¹¹

Table 5.3 Acreage under Crops and Grass, Acreage of Arable Land, and Numbers of Dairy Cattle: Leicestershire 1919-1939*			
	1919	1939	Change 1919-1939
Total Acreage of Crops and Grass	470903	445738	-25165
Acreage Under Arable Cultivation	131023	67618	-63405
Numbers of Dairy Cattle	35778	42120	6342

*Sources: MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919*, Vol.54, Table 3 (pp.20-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939*, Vol.74, Table 2 (pp.10-23).

New opportunities were taken in dairy farming in counties such as those straddling the line between the traditional arable and pastoral regions; Taylor has mentioned Warwickshire and Leicestershire, two counties well known for their grazing and with large numbers of sheep and beef cattle, as areas of growing milk production in the decade following the First World War.¹² Both Leicestershire and Warwickshire saw increases in dairy cattle numbers that were above the national average across both decades of the interwar period;

¹⁰ Abbott, p.407.

¹¹ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p.274; Fletcher, 'Economic Development', p.220.

¹² Taylor, D., pp.62-3.

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Leicestershire's increase was of 18 percent between 1919 and 1939 and Warwickshire's was 21 percent. The assertion that arable farmers and larger farmers in general were benefiting from expanding their dairy farming is supported by data from these two Midlands counties in which dairy cattle numbers had increased. The arable acreage almost halved in Leicestershire and in Warwickshire it fell by 43 percent whilst average farm size increased substantially in both counties from sizes that were just above the 1919 average for England of just over 67 acres to being, relatively, well above the 1939 figure of 72.5 acres; Leicestershire's average farm had increased by over 21 percent to 83 acres by 1939 whilst Warwickshire's expanded to almost 81 acres, an increase of 14.5 percent. Falls of 22 percent in farm numbers in Leicestershire and of 18.5 percent in Warwickshire occurred alongside the increases in average farm size, indicating that small farms were disappearing in the Midlands over the interwar years at a disproportionately fast rate.¹³

A similar pattern to that found in the Midlands is to be found in the grazing county of Westmorland which, though deeply embedded in the north of the pastoral zone, had little in the way of a traditional dairy industry in 1919 but large numbers of sheep. Westmorland saw its dairy herd expand by 17 percent by 1939 and its arable acreage contract by 42 percent. Westmorland's arable contraction is all the more significant because, although arable covered an area of only 21 percent in 1919, its contraction was coincident with an expansion of rough grazing of 18.5 percent in a county where the total acreage of rough

¹³ Table 3.2; Table 5.3; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Tables 3 (pp.20-9) and 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Tables 2 (pp.10-23) and 11 (pp.38-9).

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grazing was so extensive that it exceeded the county's total area of crops and grass by 1939. Such a coincidence is of the type that, it has been noted, Grigg saw happening as a result of reclassification by farmers of some of their arable land and which, it can be seen, occurred as arable production was sacrificed for dairy whilst former arable land was used as occasional, or even regular, grazing but defined as rough grazing. Westmorland's arable contraction and increased rough grazing allied to expanding dairy cattle numbers again indicate the move of arable farmers into dairying and that this was at the expense of small farms is demonstrated by the increase in the average size of farm in Westmorland of 28.5 percent, resulting in an average size of farm, inclusive of rough grazing, of 175 acres. It can be seen that farms in grazing areas were considerably larger than dairy farms, despite falling within the pastoral zone where farms were reputedly smaller than in the arable zone; even ignoring rough grazing, Westmorland farms each covered 81 acres on average in 1939.¹⁴

Farms in the North Riding of Yorkshire, renowned like Westmorland for its grazing and home to over 800,000 sheep by 1939, were of only a slightly smaller size at 79.5 acres on average without taking rough grazing into account. The county followed a similar, if even more marked, pattern of small farm disappearance as that in other grazing counties in the pastoral zone, showing falls in total farm numbers and increases in average farm size. Average farm size, inclusive of rough grazing, had increased considerably by 21 percent between 1919 and 1939 and the net percentage of farms of up to 50 acres in

¹⁴ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Tables 3 (pp.20-9) and 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Tables 2 (pp.10-23) and 11 (pp.38-9).

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size that had disappeared was remarkably high at 27.5 percent. Chapman has commented upon the expansion of dairy farming in parts of this county which is close to the line between the arable and pastoral zones, and numbers of dairy cattle increased by 11 percent.¹⁵ The 11 percent figure is somewhat below the national average but it is significant insofar as it accompanies small farm disappearance as well as increases in the size and number of larger farms. Farms of between 50 and 300 acres, in contrast to the disappearing small farms, saw no change in their numbers between 1920 and 1939 and actual increases in numbers of larger farms can be seen in some sub-categories; farms of 100 to 150 acres increased by 2.5 percent and farms of 50 to 100 acres marginally increased in number.¹⁶

Table 5.4 Numbers of Farms in Large and Small Size Categories in Yorkshire North Riding 1919-1939*							
	Number of Holdings						
	Year	1919	1931	Change 1919-1931	1939	Change 1931-1939	Change 1919-1939
<i>Farm Size</i>							
1-5 acres		2053	1506	-547	1293	-213	-760
5-20 acres		3057	2432	-625	2060	-372	-997
20-50 acres		1978	1916	-62	1781	-135	-197
1-50 acres		7088	5854	-1234	5134	-720	-1954
50 acres and above		5154	5094	-60	5091	-3	-63
All Farms		12242	10948	-1294	10225	-723	-2017

* Sources: MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Table 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1931, Vol.66*, Table 8 (pp.64-5); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Table 11 (pp.38-9).

¹⁵ Chapman, p.140.

¹⁶ Table 5.4; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Tables 3 (pp.20-9) and 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Tables 2 (pp.10-23) and 11 (pp.38-9).

The statistical evidence presented here from counties across the pastoral north and west of England for the years 1919 to 1939 is consistent with that seen for the West Riding and Lancashire. Counties that were already renowned for livestock production, both dairy and fatstock, exhibited the same tendencies as seen in the counties straddling the Pennines which were of falls in the arable area and increases in the numbers of dairy cattle. The increases in dairy cattle were accompanied by disproportionately large decreases in numbers of the small farms that were traditionally associated with milk production. Small farms can no longer be seen to have enjoyed advantages of production and location for dairying in the pastoral region of England that they had before the First World War and the evidence certainly casts doubt on any notion of the advantages enjoyed by the traditional family dairy farm by as late as the 1950s.¹⁷ Increasing average farm size alongside larger farms witnessing minimal falls in their numbers and, in some cases, small increases, are, highly suggestive of successful diversification by large-scale farmers in the pastoral region. Large-scale farmers decreased their reliance on arable farming and turned to dairying as a means of survival across the pastoral region with the increased competition they brought to the milk industry causing severe problems for small farmers, not just in the counties in which the large farms were situated but in locations at considerable distances. Large-scale farms that were not necessarily in the immediate vicinity of the markets to which they sent their milk increased the competition for small-scale producers in local markets and this must be seen as contributing to the disappearance of small farms in counties, such as Lancashire,

¹⁷ Winstanley, p.193.

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where there was high demand. Grazing counties, such as Westmorland and the North Riding, saw farm size increases and arable acreage shrinkage that were due to increased numbers of animals for fattening but also partly due to the increases in dairy animals that were increasing the pressure on small, specialist dairy producers.

Dairy Farming in Arable England between the Wars

The extensive falls in the North Riding in numbers of small farms are part of a pattern affecting the other counties in the pastoral region of England examined in this study. The corollary, seen in the North Riding as well as the other counties, is the better fortune enjoyed by larger farms in terms of the numbers surviving; furthermore, as in those other counties, this situation was accompanied by a decrease in the arable acreage in the North Riding. The fall of 23 percent in the arable acreage in the North Riding that took place between 1919 and 1939 is one that is less extensive than in the other grazing counties addressed here and this appears to be especially anomalous given that arable land covered a greater area in 1919 in the North Riding, at 42 percent, than in those other counties. The effects of the arable depression, that has been a mainstay of the historiography of interwar agriculture since its inception, would be expected to be more serious as the proportion of a county's arable acreage increased; that is to say that more substantial falls in the arable acreage might

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be expected to have taken place compared with counties with smaller arable areas.¹⁸

A memorandum of 13 March 1930 from a committee set up to enquire into the extent of depression in agriculture found depression to be limited in its severity except in arable areas characterised by cereal growing, noting, 'It is practically certain that the situation on the corn-growing lands of the eastern counties and parts of Hampshire [...] is worse today than at any time since the Armistice.'¹⁹ Wilt has commented upon the significance of the acreage of wheat grown in the north east of England²⁰ in which the North Riding is located and so it is surprising to find the fall in the county's arable acreage to be, though significant, proportionally smaller than in the grazing counties examined where the arable acreage was more restricted in 1919; Westmorland, for example, has been seen to have experienced a 42 percent fall in its arable acreage between 1919 and 1939.²¹

An examination of statistics shows that, in general, the small size of fall in the arable acreage of the North Riding, relative to the grazing counties, is matched in counties considered to be cereal growers within the arable zone itself, contrasting thereby with the expectation that arises from extensive arable falls elsewhere and from the opinion given by the MAF report of 1930, above. The East Riding of Yorkshire which had arable coverage of 70 percent of its

¹⁸ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Tables 3 (pp.20-9) and 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Tables 2 (pp.10-23) and 11 (pp.38-9).

¹⁹ NA/MAF/38/18.

²⁰ Wilt, p.25.

²¹ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Tables 3 (pp.20-9) and 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Tables 2 (pp.10-23) and 11 (pp.38-9).

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farmland in 1919 saw only a 13 percent fall in that coverage whilst East Suffolk saw a 15 percent fall, West Suffolk 12 percent and Norfolk 11 percent; these were counties dominated by arable agriculture with 74, 80 and 75 percent respectively of their crops and grass dedicated to it. Essex's reduction of arable land was more marked but, at 27 percent, exceeded the North Riding's by four percent and was considerably lower than the falls in the grazing counties of Leicestershire, Warwickshire and Westmorland and in the dairy counties of Gloucestershire and Lancashire, being lower even than the West Riding's 29 percent shrinkage. Essex's arable coverage was a little lower than in the other eastern counties mentioned here, at 67 percent, but was much greater than that of the pastoral counties; thus, Essex seems to fit the general though not absolute pattern that can be seen here wherein the lower the proportion of land a county had dedicated to arable production the higher was the relative extent of the loss of its arable land. Hampshire fails to fit the pattern whereby the smaller a specific county's arable acreage was in 1919 the greater was the fall in that acreage by 1939. Hampshire witnessed a 37 percent fall in its arable acreage but its arable acreage was, predictably for a county in the arable region, quite high at 62.5 percent of its crops and grass in 1919, falling to 45 percent. West Sussex, which falls comfortably on the arable side of the line dividing arable from pastoral production and was known as an arable county²² but which of all the arable counties examined here had the lowest arable acreage at 52 percent, saw a quite considerable 45 percent fall in that acreage. West Sussex's

²² Whetham, *Agrarian History*, p.2.

fall in combination with Hampshire's figures undermines the pattern of arable counties witnessing lower falls in their arable acreages than pastoral counties.²³

The data suggests that a deteriorating situation for arable farming in general was not necessarily at its worst in those areas where arable farming was at its most extensive but the most striking statistic details the growth in numbers of dairy cattle in the cereal counties. Counties renowned for their arable production, such as Sussex and Norfolk were seeing moves by farmers into dairy farming in the 1920s,²⁴ with the cereal counties commented upon in the 1923 *Agricultural Statistics*: 'It was mainly in the east of the country that there were larger herds than in 1922.'²⁵ Douet has found that farmers of all sizes in Norfolk were prepared to take on dairy herds during the 1920s, including smallholders and arable farmers but also the large-scale mixed farmers who were able to incorporate a milk herd into their four-course rotation.²⁶ Percentage increases in dairy cattle across the arable region between 1919 and 1939 were at least as high as the national average increase of 17 percent and were in most cases considerably higher. Huntingdon and the East Riding of Yorkshire both matched the national average increase whilst the increases in Norfolk and West Suffolk were large at 29 and 30 percent but were dwarfed by increases in Essex of 37 percent, in Hampshire of 39 percent, in East Suffolk of 43 percent and in West Sussex of 45 percent. Areas of extensive arable farming, therefore, also looked to dairying as another means of maintaining farm profitability, both where it

²³ Table 5.6; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Tables 3 (pp.20-9) and 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Tables 2 (pp.10-23) and 11 (pp.38-9).

²⁴ Taylor, D., pp.62-3.

²⁵ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1923, Vol.58*, p.13.

²⁶ Douet, pp.86, 190-5.

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would appear to have been strictly necessary, such as in Hampshire and West Sussex where arable acreages saw considerable falls, or elsewhere in counties where arable acreages fell by considerably less and, thus, possibly as a means merely of increasing the possible options for future survival or prosperity.²⁷

Table 5.5 Acreage under Crops and Grass, Acreage of Arable Land, and Numbers of Dairy Cattle in East Suffolk 1919-1939*			
	1919	1939	Change 1919-1939
Total Acreage of Crops and Grass	454433	427666	-26767
Acreage Under Arable Cultivation	334146	285344	-48802
Numbers of Dairy Cattle	16438	23472	7034

*Sources: MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Table 3 (pp.20-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Table 2 (pp.10-23).

Table 5.6 Acreage under Crops and Grass, Acreage of Arable Land, and Numbers of Dairy Cattle in Hampshire 1919-1939*			
	1919	1939	Change 1919-1939
Total Acreage of Crops and Grass	592383	522482	-69901
Acreage Under Arable Cultivation	371281	235060	-136221
Numbers of Dairy Cattle	35696	49609	13913

*Sources: MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Table 3 (pp.20-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Table 2 (pp.10-23).

Any notion that average farm size might fall in arable counties as dairy farming expanded there, in line with the traditional pattern of dairy farming taking place on smaller farms than arable, is confounded by analysis of data

²⁷ Table 5.5; Table 5.7 and *Sources; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Tables 3 (pp.20-9) and 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Tables 2 (pp.10-23) and 11 (pp.38-9).

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from the *Agricultural Statistics*. Average farm size actually increased in arable counties in the south of England between 1919 and 1939. A conspicuous example of the expansion of the milk industry on large farms in this region could be found on the north-western boundary of Hampshire with Wiltshire. This was the location of A.J. Hosier's controversial experiment with large-scale milk production whereby 300 cattle were kept and milked outdoors all year round on 1000 acres, the herd increasing as the operation expanded to 2,500 acres in extent.²⁸ Average farm size increased in Hampshire and in West Sussex, counties which saw increases of 7.5 percent and almost 3 percent, respectively. Eastern England saw increases in average farm size which ranged from moderate increases of 1 acre in Norfolk and 2.5 acres in Essex, bringing average size to over 80 and 90 acres, respectively, to an increase of over 11 acres in the East Riding of Yorkshire where average farm size in 1939 was over 106 acres. West Suffolk's average farm had been nudging 100 acres in size in 1919 but was almost 108 by 1939. The density of stocking and a doubling in numbers of poultry in East Suffolk between 1921 and 1939²⁹ along with increases in numbers of farms of one to five acres suggest that poultry holdings were being created in the county between the Wars, reducing the overall average farm size; however, leaving out the farms of this smallest size category and taking into account the possibility of the erroneous designation of grazing land as rough grazing, estimates show that the county saw a small rise in average farm size from around 109.5 acres to 110.5 acres. Greater than all the increases so far

²⁸ Whetham, *Agrarian History*, pp.190-1.

²⁹ Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Economic Series, No.11; Marketing of Poultry in England and Wales* (London: HMSO, 1927), p.143.

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mentioned, excluding rough grazing, was that of the midlands county of Huntingdon, which saw the average size of its farms expand from under 85 acres to over 100, an increase of almost 18.5 percent. Lincoln-Holland witnessed an increase of 9.5 percent in its average farm size.³⁰

The assumption that the deteriorating conditions for arable farming detailed in the historiography would lead to the disappearance of arable farmers has been shown to be true only in the technical sense but it did not mean the actual disappearance of these farmers because arable farmers turned to dairy farming for salvation; however, increasing average farm size in the arable counties is suggestive of farm disappearance and falls in farm numbers in the arable region were, indeed, noticeable. A considerable net fall³¹ took place in the number of farms in Hampshire; 1,500 of the 6,854 farms enumerated in 1919, a number equal to 18 percent of the total, had disappeared by 1939. The proportion of farms disappearing in Hampshire is slightly smaller than that for West Sussex which saw an 18.5 percent decrease in farm numbers between 1919 and 1939, from 3,277 to 2,699. Farm numbers in the cereal counties examined fell, with the exception of East Suffolk where they fluctuated but, due to the creation of poultry holdings of one to five acres, were virtually the same in number in 1939 as in 1919. Numbers in Essex, the East Riding and West Suffolk fell by fourteen, 13.5 and thirteen percent, respectively. Norfolk's fall of nine

³⁰ Table 3.2; Table 5.5; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Tables 3 (pp.20-9) and 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Tables 2 (pp.10-23) and 11 (pp.38-9).

³¹ Figures on farm disappearance for counties are available in the *Agricultural Statistics* published annually from 1919 to 1939 and do not include increases and falls in farm numbers caused by the creation of statutory smallholdings. MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Tables 3 (pp.20-9) and 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1931, Vol.66*, Table 8 (pp.64-5); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Tables 2 (pp.10-23) and 11 (pp.38-9).

percent is lower than in much of East Anglia because of the enthusiasm with which the State and County Council created smallholdings in the county. Lincoln-Holland has already been noted as a county with a quarter of its farms being State subsidised smallholdings in 1932 but, even so, it had a farm disappearance rate of 10.5 percent between 1919 and 1939. Huntingdon's farms saw a 21.5 percent fall in numbers. The pattern in the pastoral region where farm disappearance was taking place simultaneously with the combination of increases in average farm size, reduction of arable acreages and increases in numbers of dairy cattle can be seen to have been repeated in the arable region. The pattern is indicative of the move of arable farmers into dairy farming and demonstrates the existence of another source of competition for those traditionally engaged in the fresh milk market.³²

Small farmers have been shown to have experienced particularly difficult conditions in both dairy and livestock grazing areas. Farmers in traditional dairy areas in the interwar period were in greater competition than before amongst themselves in the fresh milk market as well as with farmers in traditional grazing areas, but were also feeling competition from farms showing increases in dairy cattle numbers in the region considered to be dominated by arable production. Difficulties in arable farming saw many occupants of statutory smallholdings in Norfolk turning to dairy farming³³ and were likely to have initiated a change into dairy farming amongst small arable farmers, in general; however, there is no intuitive reason to suggest that they would have fared any better than small-

³² Ibid.

³³ Douet, p.86.

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scale farmers elsewhere and this is borne out by statistics. The cereal counties of Norfolk and Lincoln-Holland saw 12 percent and 11.5 percent respective falls in their farms of below 50 acres in size between 1919 and 1939 in spite of the extensive existence of statutory smallholdings within their borders. Figures for another cereal county, West Suffolk, reflect what might have been the case for small farm numbers in Norfolk and Lincoln-Holland had those two counties not been privileged by the significant subsidy represented by smallholdings. West Suffolk showed a fall in numbers of just over 17 percent which was distributed relatively evenly between farms of one to five acres, five to 20 acres and 20 to 50 acres in size. Conditions were extremely serious elsewhere in the arable region for small farms, the disappearance of 22.5 percent of Hampshire's farms of one to 50 acres in size being representative.³⁴

Larger farms fared considerably better in the arable region with farms of over 50 acres in size in Norfolk showing only a 2.5 percent rate of disappearance; Norfolk's farms of 50 to 150 acres actually saw their numbers increase, as did the North Riding which, though a grazing county, had a relatively extensive arable acreage compared to other grazing counties. Hampshire saw a rate of increase of over 4.5 percent in its farms in the 100 to 150 acre size category. The disappearance of large farms in the counties of the arable region did not necessarily find its origins directly in economic problems of large-scale farmers but often in the sale of land for the creation of statutory

³⁴ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Tables 3 (pp.20-9) and 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Tables 2 (pp.10-23) and 11 (pp.38-9); Table 5.9.

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smallholdings in the two or three years immediately after the First World War as, for example, at Sutton Bridge in Lincoln-Holland.³⁵ Falls in numbers of farms of

Table 5.7 Numbers of Farms in Large and Small Size Categories in Norfolk 1919-1939*							
	Number of Holdings						
	Year	1919	1931	Change 1919-1931	1939	Change 1931-1939	Change 1919-1939
<i>Farm Size</i>							
1-5 acres		3200	3049	-151	2549	-500	-651
5-20 acres		3288	3290	2	2901	-389	-387
20-50 acres		2367	2440	73	2346	-94	-21
1-50 acres		8855	8779	-76	7796	-983	-1059
50 acres and above		4441	4468	27	4328	-140	-113
All Farms		13296	13247	-49	12124	-1123	-1172

* Sources: MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Table 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1931, Vol.66*, Table 8 (pp.64-5); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Table 11 (pp.38-9).

above 150 acres in extent in Norfolk can be explained partially by the willingness of landowners to sell large areas of land to the County Council for division into the smallholdings that became prevalent in the county.³⁶ The demands of David Lloyd George for an investigation into what he considered to be the exceptionally high prices paid to landowners for the sale of their land for smallholding creation is indicative of the willingness with which sales were made just after the War at a time when prosperity abounded in agriculture and prices for land had soared.³⁷ Sales of large farms for the creation of smallholdings just after the First World War would explain the trend in numbers of West Suffolk's farms of over 300 acres in size; 28 of 251, or just over 7 percent, of these large farms disappeared

³⁵ NA/MAF48/330.

³⁶ Douet, p.84.

³⁷ NA/MAF/48/74.

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in the year 1919 to 1920 leaving 233 farms, the same number as existed 19 years later in 1939. At least part of the loss of 6 percent of farms of above 50 acres in Lincoln-Holland is ascribable to similar reasons as those accounting for the diminution of Norfolk's large farms, Lincoln Holland being the location of many smallholdings including the State 'colonies' at Holbeach and Sutton Bridge.³⁸ Hampshire saw its statutory smallholdings numbering 631 in 1932, which, like Lincoln-Holland and Norfolk, would account for the loss of some of the 6 percent of the large farms that had disappeared in the county between 1919 and 1939. West Suffolk lost 7.5 percent of its farms of over 50 acres but, again, this is partially attributable to over 10 percent of its farms in 1932 being statutory smallholdings, many of which would have been created from land from the farms of over 50 acres acquired by the State.³⁹

It seems that even the numbers of losses of large farms cannot be seen as, necessarily, a result of difficult agricultural conditions and would have been, in many cases, exaggerated when consideration is given to the reason for the disappearance of many larger farms being their landowners' desire to sell them at inflated prices for the creation of smallholdings. Even taking into account the breaking-up of large farms to create smallholdings, no county examined here from within the arable region saw its farms of 50 acres and above disappearing at a rate even close to that of its small farms. Lincoln-Holland actually saw a 5 percent increase in its farms of over 300 acres in extent. Any comparison of rates of disappearance of large and small farms should take into account that

³⁸ Table 5.4 and *Sources; Table 5.7; Table 5.9; NA/MAF/48/336, *Sutton Bridge and Holbeach Farm Settlements, Annual Reports, 1924-39*.

³⁹ MAF, *Economic Series, No.11*.

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the rate of decrease in numbers of small farms between 1919 and 1939 is the net percentage rate, rather than the gross rate, and does not take into account the numbers of small farms created during the interwar period. The net rates of small farm disappearance in England and its counties, high though they are, remain an underestimate of total decreases so that the disparity between the fortunes of the small and large farms was even greater than these statistics make them appear.⁴⁰

The Effects of Dairy Expansion on Small Milk Producers

A similar pattern of agricultural change has emerged in counties across England in the interwar years to that seen in the northern pastoral counties of the West Riding and Lancashire where milk production for the liquid market was a mainstay of the agriculture. The benefits of a 17 percent expansion of the dairy herd in England between 1919 and 1939 might be thought most likely to have accrued to the small farms traditionally associated with dairying in the West Riding and Lancashire; Chapter Four has shown that, in actuality, it was the larger farms in the Pennine counties associated more commonly with arable farming and grazing which achieved the greater gains, when measured by their survival rates over the interwar period. The decrease of the arable acreage in the West Riding and Lancashire that was coincident with the growth of the dairy herds and the decline of the small dairy farms indicates that arable farms were

⁴⁰ Table 3.3; Table 5.9; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Tables 3 (pp.20-9) and 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Tables 2 (pp.10-23) and 11 (pp.38-9); Smith, N.R., *Land*, pp.234-6.

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turning to dairying at the expense of traditional, small dairy farms. Arable farms tended traditionally to be larger and the growth in average size of the two counties' farms and the much higher survival rates of these counties' large farms is highly suggestive of a turn by large farmers to milk production. This pattern of large farm survival and small farm disappearance is apparent in an exaggerated form across all the counties examined here as representative of agriculture in England. Expansion of dairying has been shown to have taken place to a much greater extent in other parts of the pastoral region beyond the Pennines counties as well as and especially in the traditionally arable area of the south and east of England. The statistics examined here make it clear that milk production would have been a possible route to prosperity for many large-scale farmers in counties dominated by large farms across both the arable and pastoral regions of England who had developed and expanded production during the 1920s and 1930s.

Expansion of dairy farming might reasonably be expected to have occurred in the traditional dairy counties, as represented in Chapter Four by the West Riding and Lancashire where Taylor observed that it was surprisingly limited, at least during the 1920s.⁴¹ Increases in the dairy herds in the two counties took place at a higher rate than Taylor indicated when the whole of the interwar period is taken into account but were still relatively small, being below the average for England. The failure of the small farms traditionally known to specialise in fresh milk production in the northern industrial counties, demonstrated by their disappearance in large numbers from the *Agricultural*

⁴¹ Taylor, D., p.62.

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Statistics, has already been seen to have been simultaneous with the decrease of arable farming in the area and with the increase of average farm size. The resulting suggestion that the many small dairy farms suffered at the hands of a turn to milk production on the less numerous large arable farms within the Pennine counties has already been supported by contemporary interwar commentary but the statistics examined in the current chapter suggest that competition for small Pennine farmers also came from counties less traditionally known as dairy producers. The same pattern of increasing dairy production, small farm failure, arable decline, increasing farm size and higher rates of large farm survival have been shown to have existed across almost the whole of interwar England.

Rates of growth of dairy herds in the arable region of England and in the pastoral region outside of the West Riding and Lancashire greatly surpassed those of the two Pennine counties whilst arable and pastoral counties alike saw disproportionately high rates of disappearance of their small farms. The small farms that supplied liquid milk to large urban centres, like those in the West Riding and Lancashire, were, thus, coming under pressure from expanding production within their own counties and localities. However, the expansion of dairy production elsewhere in the pastoral region as well as, and especially, in the arable region, facilitated by the rapid development of road transport after the First World War,⁴² make it clear that it was not only from within their own counties that the small traditional dairy farms found their markets coming under attack but also from large farms from much further afield; for example, the West

⁴² Ibid.

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Riding received milk from Derbyshire whilst Liverpool and Manchester were supplied from as far afield as Staffordshire. Captain Cleveland Fyfe of the NFU was certain of the detrimental effects upon traditional milk producers of arable farms turning to milk production in the period between the First World War and November 1934; these farms were generally large in size and were located in what were considered the corn growing counties of the arable region of England. Cleveland Fyfe made the following statement in evidence to the Royal Commission set up to investigate the effects of annual tithe payments by farmers and landowners to tithe holders:

In my view there is no doubt that the decline in the arable areas directly affected the milk market. People went out of corn production and into milk production, and the result was disastrous.⁴³

The *Lincoln and Boston Guardian* confirms that farmers in the arable areas dominated by large farms had been cutting their cereal production, writing in 1931,

Corn growing [...] has not paid [...] for the last 3 years at least. Such is the state of affairs that has driven so many farmers, even in the arable stronghold of the Eastern counties, to reduce their ploughland commitments to the minimum.⁴⁴

The fate of the small dairy farmers of the north who were to be found clustered around their local urban markets was shared by any small farmers

⁴³ Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge, *Minutes of Evidence*, p.121.

⁴⁴ *Lincoln and Boston Guardian*, 10 January 1931.

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whose function had been the supply of liquid milk to urban markets. The traditional understanding of the dairy farm as, generally, a small-scale undertaking is further undermined by developments in the pastoral region outside of the industrial north as well as in the arable regions. Small farms in the arable and pastoral areas may well have been trying to take advantage of dairy farming but substantial falls in their numbers suggest that they were not succeeding despite substantial increases in numbers of dairy cattle within those counties. Evidence of disproportionately high disappearance of small farms in all counties makes it clear that traditional dairy farms were being put under increased commercial pressure in all areas from new sources of their product in the shape of large farms in both the arable and pastoral regions. Mr. S.O. Ratcliff of the NFU gave the following reply at the Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge hearings when prompted to confirm by the chairman of the proceedings that, 'What you mean is that the result of the fall in the price of corn was that cornland went out of cultivation and became land that was producing milk.':

I am only saying that the trend is that a person who has been put out of production of a particular thing switches over to another and ruins the other man in that particular branch, and so it goes on, and the general effect is that where a particular branch is paying at the time, it loses its position as a result of the other man being put out of business because

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any general switch over to any particular commodity damages that commodity.⁴⁵

The realisation of Ratcliff's statement was seen in the failure of the small farms in all areas that once might have been able to find prosperity in fresh milk production. An investigation by MAF into the possibility of providing smallholdings for the unemployed in 1932 was extremely pessimistic regarding the opportunities for small farms to enter the milk market in Cumberland, stating baldly, 'Dairy farming has reached saturation point.'⁴⁶

The changes taking place in the structure of milk production in the West Riding and Lancashire in the interwar years are indicative of what has been shown to have been happening across England with the salient factor in all the counties examined here being the disproportionately high numbers of failures of small farms when compared with farms of over 50 acres in extent. The conclusion that arises is simply that large arable farms in these counties escaped from the suffering that might have been expected as a result of difficult economic conditions for the sale of arable produce by developing their dairy production and, in the process, driving small farms out of business. The identification of farmers in the western counties, such as Gloucestershire and Devon, and the midlands counties, some of which have been examined here, whose milk was sent by rail to London and other urban centres is indicative of the general tendency for large-scale farmers to enter into the liquid milk market

⁴⁵ Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge, *Minutes of Evidence*, pp.120-1.

⁴⁶ NA/MAF/48/94.

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formerly the domain of small producers.⁴⁷ Farms in the western counties were of a size close to the national average in 1919 and so cannot be said to have been small whilst farms in the midlands counties of Leicestershire, Warwickshire and Huntingdon averaged 83, 80 and 100 acres, respectively, and were, thus, comparatively large.⁴⁸

The current chapter has shown that the kind of advantages from the growth in milk production enjoyed by large Pennine farms over small ones were, in turn, enjoyed by large farms in counties associated more commonly with arable farming and grazing whilst small farms shared only the problems. The national expansion of dairy farming took place on farms of greater than 50 acres in size in all the counties examined and that it coincided with the abandonment of arable farming on large areas of land in all counties is as much testament to a belief in the potential profits available in the milk market as to the difficulties current in the interwar period in arable farming. The statement from MAF's departmental committee on the rural settlement of discharged servicemen from 1916 that said, 'We believe that small dairy holdings devoted mainly to the production of milk might be increased in number almost indefinitely', demonstrates that large-scale farmers were correct in identifying a profitable opportunity to be gained in converting to dairying at that early date;⁴⁹ evidence on the expansion of the dairy industry shows that many had followed their instinct for profitability. The geographical spread of the counties examined here

⁴⁷ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p.273; Venn, 1923, *Foundations*, pp.319-20.

⁴⁸ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Tables 3 (pp.20-9) and 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Tables 2 (pp.10-23) and 11 (pp.38-9).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*; NA/MAF/48/26.

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shows that the difficulties experienced by small farms as a result of the expansion of the dairying operations of large farms extended to virtually all parts of England. The suggestion that prosperity could be found in the dairy industry in the interwar years is not one that can be seen from the point of view of the small farmer, whose holdings made up 64.5 percent of England's farms in 1919; this is made especially obvious when consideration is taken that at least 18 percent of small-scale farmers and their farms, existent in 1919, were no longer in business in 1939.⁵⁰

The evidence provided demonstrates that the expansion of the dairy industry was simultaneous with difficult conditions and high rates of disappearance of small farms in all counties, suggesting that small farms had, increasingly, little to gain in any location either from continuing to operate as dairy producers as the interwar years progressed or from switching to dairy from other farming types in any kind of attempt to survive. Indeed, high rates of disappearance of small farms suggest that small farms found it considerably more difficult to participate in the expansion of dairying in England over the interwar years than large ones. Evidence shows that farms supplying the liquid milk markets had, traditionally, been smaller operations, such as those run as producer retailing businesses, and the evidence showing falls in numbers of small farms in both of the industrial counties of the Pennines where such farms were known to proliferate is compelling.

⁵⁰ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Tables 3 (pp.20-9) and 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Tables 2 (pp.10-23) and 11 (pp.38-9); Smith, N.R., *Land*, pp.234-6.

The definitive statistical evidence of the difficulties faced by small farms trying to compete in the market for fresh milk comes from Lincoln-Holland where small farms made up a large majority of total agricultural holdings; farms of less than 50 acres in extent made up 78.5 percent of total holdings in 1919, a figure which had risen to 81.5 percent by 1923. Specific local landscape conditions which delayed drainage of the Fenland until the mid-nineteenth century had resulted in the deliberate development of an agriculture of overwhelmingly small farms in Lincoln-Holland by the twentieth century on some of the most fertile agricultural land in England.⁵¹ Average farm size in Lincoln-Holland was only 45 acres in 1919.⁵² The coincidence of fertile land and small acreages appeared to have created a resilience amongst Lincoln-Holland's small farmers which had been much admired during the 'Great Depression' of the last quarter of the nineteenth century,⁵³ leading to the assumption amongst many commentators at the time that the future of British agriculture lay in the hands of small farmers;⁵⁴ William Henry Wheeler had written extensively on the Fenland, commenting favourably on smallholdings in Lincoln Holland in 1896, stating, 'the increase of these holdings appears to be a national gain.'⁵⁵ It has already been noted that Lincoln-Holland was the location for the establishment of at least two large

⁵¹ Beastall, pp.67-73; Grigg, *Agricultural Revolution*, pp.170-1, 197; NA/MAF 48/330; Parker, A., and Pye, D., *The Fenland* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1976), p.181.

⁵² Table 3.2; Table 5.8; Table 5.9.

⁵³ Thirsk, J., *English Peasant Farming; The Agrarian History of Lincolnshire from Tudor to Recent Times* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), p.317.

⁵⁴ Bone, pp.653-61.

⁵⁵ Wheeler, W.H., *A History of the Fens of South Lincolnshire* (Boston: J.M. Newcomb, 1896; repr. Spalding: Paul Watkins, 1990), p.422.

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estates of smallholdings by MAF in 1919 and this was a result of its reputation for small farm success.⁵⁶

Dairy farming in Lincoln-Holland was no salvation for farmers. Lincoln-Holland is the only county examined here to see a fall in numbers of dairy cattle between 1919 and 1939; the fall was a substantial one of 22 percent. The county's reputation for successful farming on limited acreages counted for little and small farms of the type associated with dairy farming suffered very badly during the interwar years; farms of one to 50 acres in size decreased at a net rate of 11.5 percent between 1919 and 1939. These farms of one to fifty acres in size saw a rate of decrease of 21 percent between 1923 and 1939, a high rate of decrease despite the creation of smallholdings by MAF and the County Council which caused an increase in total numbers of small farms between 1919 and 1923.⁵⁷ The reputation of Lincoln-Holland as a location for prosperous small farms was cemented by the establishment in 1919 by the Ministry of Agriculture of two large 'colonies' of smallholdings in the county, one of 75 holdings at Holbeach and the other including 114 smallholdings at Sutton Bridge.⁵⁸ The Sutton Bridge settlement included the creation of holdings of up to 50 acres, with, for example, four existing farms being broken up in 1925 into 17 individual smallholdings that ranged from 32 to 44 acres in extent. The decrease of 21 percent of farms of less than 50 acres between 1923 and 1939 is a figure that represents something between the net and gross rates of decrease for the

⁵⁶ NA/MAF/48/320, *Holbeach Farm Settlement, Main Acquisition, 1916-1920*; NA/MAF 48/330.

⁵⁷ Table 5.8; Table 5.9; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1923, Vol.58*, Tables 2 (pp.24-34) and 5 (pp.42-3).

⁵⁸ NA/MAF/48/336; NA/MAF/48/320.

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county across the interwar period. The decrease in dairy cattle numbers in Lincoln-Holland of over a fifth occurring simultaneously with the disappearance of large numbers of the small-scale holdings of the kind associated traditionally with successful milk production leaves little doubt that small dairy farms were suffering.⁵⁹

Table 5.8 Acreage under Crops and Grass, Acreage of Arable Land, and Numbers of Dairy Cattle in Lincoln-Holland 1919-1939*			
	1919	1939	Change 1919-1939
Total Acreage of Crops and Grass	242376	237938	-4438
Acreage Under Arable Cultivation	189000	193151	4151
Numbers of Dairy Cattle	7178	5598	-1580

*Sources: MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Table 3 (pp.20-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Table 2 (pp.10-23).

The smaller of the small farms in Lincoln Holland were particularly hard hit. Farms of between five and 20 acres disappeared at a rate of 18.5 percent between 1919 and 1939 but at a rate of 29 percent between 1923 and 1939 whilst farms of one to five acres saw 26.5 percent of their numbers disappear between 1923 and 1939;⁶⁰ once again, these are figures that still fail to represent entirely the potential level of disappearance of small farms because they do not take into account the full extent of the creation of smallholdings by MAF and the County Council between 1923 and 1939 and so are not based on the total number of small farms that would have been in existence over the course of the interwar period. Many of these disappearing farms of between one

⁵⁹ Table 5.8; table 5.9.

⁶⁰ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Table 3 (pp.20-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1923, Vol.58*, Table 5 (pp.42-3); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Table 2 (pp.10-23).

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and 20 acres in size would have been the dairy holdings formerly home to the dairy cattle whose numbers fell by 22 percent. The 1916 report of the First World War Government committee upon whose recommendation the settling of discharged servicemen on newly created smallholdings after the War would take place had identified dairy holdings as a particularly good opportunity for smallholders, stating,

In many parts of the country small grass holdings are the most successful type of small holding, and we should like to see a large increase in the number of holdings of this kind.⁶¹

The creation of dairy smallholdings certainly took place, as the following statement from the Annual Report of 1936-37 for the Sutton Bridge and Holbeach Estates of smallholdings shows, stating, 'the cow-keepers are those who register and sell milk, and a few who rear calves.'⁶² A quarter of the smallholders in Norfolk, the county immediately east of Lincoln-Holland, had turned to dairy when they found that arable farming did not pay during the 1920s.⁶³ Any doubt as to whether the farms affected so badly by the economic conditions for dairying in Lincoln-Holland over the interwar period included small farms is removed by reference to the same report for 1936-7 which refers to smallholdings of less than 50 acres in extent and contains the simple statement,

⁶¹ NA/MAF/48/26.

⁶² NA/MAF/48/336.

⁶³ Douet, p.86.

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'Dairying. It is regrettable to record that fewer tenants keep cows than hitherto.'⁶⁴

Table 5.9 Numbers of Farms in Large and Small Size Categories in Lincoln-Holland 1919-1939*							
	Number of Holdings						
	Year	1919	1931	Change 1919-1931	1939	Change 1931-1939	Change 1919-1939
<i>Farm Size</i>							
1-5 acres		1426	1384	-42	1184	-200	-242
5-20 acres		1643	1624	-19	1337	-287	-306
20-50 acres		1171	1323	152	1236	-87	65
1-50 acres		4240	4331	91	3757	-574	-483
50 acres and above		1149	1081	-68	1077	-4	-72
All Farms		5389	5412	23	4834	-578	-555

* Sources: MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919*, Vol.54, Table 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1931*, Vol.66, Table 8 (pp.64-5); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939*, Vol.74, Table 11 (pp.38-9).

Little doubt can exist that attempts were made by small farmers in counties best known for their arable production to enter into the production of milk during the interwar years but evidence presented here of extensive small farm disappearance in these counties suggests that these were in many cases unsuccessful. Lincoln-Holland can be seen as an exaggerated paradigm of the conditions affecting small farmers in the arable region as a whole. Neither the average farm size nor the size structure of the farms of Lincoln-Holland was typical of counties in the arable area. There existed a much larger proportion of small farms in Lincoln Holland than elsewhere in the arable region; the simultaneous falls in numbers of small farms and in numbers of dairy cattle can

⁶⁴ NA/MAF/48/336. Table 5.8; Table 5.9.

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be seen as a good indication of the kind of difficulties experienced generally by small farmers undertaking dairying in England.

The evidence presented here has shown that a large proportion of the small farm operations in Lincoln-Holland disappeared between the Wars, as did a substantial proportion of dairy cattle. Evidence has also shown that there was a reduction of cattle on smallholdings. Altogether, this evidence demonstrates the difficulties of making profit from milk production on small farms in Lincoln-Holland. The conditions in Lincoln-Holland are indicative of the conditions for small farms in all counties with the exception that there took place in Lincoln-Holland no decrease in the arable acreage that indicates the turn to dairy of large farmers in other counties examined, above; thus, it is clear that it was the general conditions in the national milk market that were undermining the small dairy farms in Lincoln-Holland and which must have been undermining small farmers elsewhere, as has been posited. Small farms in milk production in other counties simply felt the competition from local as well as from national sources.

Significant Factors in the Survival of Interwar Farms: Size and Subsidy

One of the major assertions made in this thesis has been that small dairy farms suffered in all areas of England in the interwar years from the growth of competition from large farms that had moved into milk production. Competition was felt both locally and from production from outside the counties in which small farms were situated. Contemporary commentary has supported this

assertion but such commentary has, in turn, been corroborated by statistical evidence showing increases in dairy cattle and falls in the arable acreage of all the counties which have been examined. The one exception to this pattern has been seen to be Lincoln-Holland where the arable proportion of farmland actually increased by 2 percent between 1919 and 1939 from taking up 79 percent of the county's agricultural area to 81 percent whilst dairy cattle numbers fell. The increase in the arable acreage suggests that, on the basis of evidence on the simultaneous arable decreases and dairy increases that took place everywhere else in England, there existed arable conditions offering sufficient returns to farmers that they felt it unnecessary to enter into dairy production; indeed, the 22 percent fall in dairy cattle numbers indicates that milk production in Lincolnshire was particularly unrewarding. However, the high percentage rates of the disappearance of small farms in Lincoln-Holland where farms of one to 50 acres in size decreased at a net rate of 11.5 percent between 1919 and 1939 and 21 percent between 1923 and 1939 suggest that some disappearance of small arable farms would have taken place. Added weight is given to this suggestion by the statistics which show that, although the proportion of the county's agricultural area under arable production increased, a small fall took place in the actual arable area between 1919 and 1939 of 4,151 acres; the increased proportion of arable land in the total area of crops and grass in 1939 compared to 1919 was caused by a greater decrease in the amount of grassland than in arable land in Lincoln-Holland between the two World Wars but this should not obscure the real fall in the arable acreage.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Table 5.8; Table 5.9.

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One of the contentions made in Chapter Four is that arable farming tended to take place on larger farms in general than did pastoral and, in particular, dairy farming. The specific historical development of Lincoln-Holland meant that certain types of arable farming had flourished on farms of less than 50 acres in size, however. Variations of arable farming were common, in particular, on the large number of smallholdings created in the county since effective legislation for statutory smallholdings, introduced in 1907, was extended by the Smallholdings and Allotments Act of 1916 and the Land Settlement (Facilities) Act in 1919;⁶⁶ creation of smallholdings was responsible for the 504 new farms of one to fifty acres appearing in the *Agricultural Statistics* for 1923 compared to 1919, and this figure will probably be an under-estimate of farm creation since it will not make apparent any simultaneous disappearance of any farms in those four years. Lincoln-Holland had the fifth highest total of statutory smallholdings in England and Wales with 1,376 in 1932, despite being a comparatively small county division of only 267,801 acres in 1919; Gloucestershire, in comparison, covered 803,297 acres in 1919 and Hampshire's acreage was 955,068. Lincoln-Holland's total number of farms was 5,412 in 1931 meaning that about a quarter of its farms in that year would have been smallholdings.⁶⁷ The 21 percent fall in the numbers of farms of between one and 50 acres between 1923 and 1939 is indicative of difficulties, not only amongst small dairy farms but on the smallholdings that were used to grow all

⁶⁶ Orwin, 'Craze', p.337; NA/MAF/48/322, *Holbeach Farm Settlement Rent Increases, 1920-22*; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1923, Vol.58*, Tables 2 (pp.24-34) and 5 (pp.42-3); Lockwood, p.444.

⁶⁷ Smith, N.R., *Land*, pp.228-36; Table 5.8; Table 5.9.

manner of crops, including traditional arable field crops, such as potatoes and cereals, as well as market garden crops, strawberries and sugar beet.⁶⁸

Considerable doubts had existed even before the end of the First World War as to the advisability of creating new arable smallholdings of less than 50 acres in extent. F.E.N. Rogers, the Smallholdings Commissioner, was asked at the hearings of MAF's departmental committee into the rural resettlement of discharged servicemen in 1916 whether he thought smallholdings and market gardening were likely to be any more profitable in the future than to date and gave the answer, 'No, I do not think one could say that. I do not think there is anything that justifies one in saying that.'⁶⁹ Documents detailing the operations of the smallholdings on the estates at Holbeach and Sutton Bridge established by MAF just after the First World War demonstrate that the difficult conditions faced by smallholders between the Wars were justifying Rogers' pessimistic pronouncement. The troubles for small arable, mixed and market gardening farmers are indicated by the high incidence of rent arrears at Sutton Bridge, which were 30 percent on 1 January 1924, and at Holbeach, which amounted to 46 percent of total rent on that date. Difficulties were apparent by as early as January 1922 when R.A.V. Spencer, the director of the estates, had written to Mr. Howes at MAF to say,

From what was said by the Committee together with knowledge acquired in the administration of the Estate, it would appear that some of the

⁶⁸ NA/MAF/48/274, *Potato Marketing Scheme, Holbeach and Sutton Bridge Estates, 1934*; NA/MAF/48/336; Smith, N.R., *Land*, p.208; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Tables 3 (pp.20-9) and 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Tables 2 (pp.10-23) and 11 (pp.38-9).

⁶⁹ NA/MAF/48/26.

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tenants are in a very low state regarding funds. The effects of this will doubtless be shown in the next year's cropping.⁷⁰

The appearance is that there was little prosperity to be found from any type of farming on smallholdings. Arable farming was typical on the smallholdings estates of Holbeach and Sutton Bridge, according to the annual reports. The most common crop was potatoes which took up 45 percent of land in 1934, but even these had been difficult to be made to pay at the market rate in 1923.⁷¹ Other crops commented upon regularly included sugar beet and cereals and there was widespread growing of market-garden field crops, such as strawberries, bulbs and tree fruit. Some, limited, reference is made in the annual reports during the 1920s to livestock, including horses, pigs and poultry in 1928-9, with the occasional reference made to calves, but the type of farming that was undertaken on smallholdings and small farms appears to have made little difference in the struggle to survive.⁷² Estimations made by MAF in 1935 revealed that smallholders would receive only 8 shillings more per week than a man with a family on unemployment allowance, less if the smallholder had four or more children, and that a weekly return of £2 15 shillings per week was impossible to realise on many smallholdings.⁷³ Professor Wibberley was damning of the whole smallholding movement and in particular the rural resettlement programme by as early as 1922, writing,

⁷⁰ NA/MAF/48/323, *Holbeach Farm Settlement, Rent Reductions Following Complaints from Settlers, 1922-8.*

⁷¹ NA/MAF/48/274.

⁷² NA/MAF/48/336.

⁷³ NA/MAF/48/105, *Small Holdings; Advances of Working Capital and Unemployment Allowances, 1935/6.*

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Hundreds of war-worn men invested their small capital in small holdings [sic] [...] As for the soldier small holder, there are plenty of them eking out an existence selling bootlaces in the Strand.⁷⁴

The difficulties of all types of small farming in Lincoln-Holland are revealed further in the references to dairy farming that have been seen above⁷⁵ but which are scanty reflecting the decline in small farm numbers and the reality of the conditions associated with dairy farming for small farmers that have been discovered in this thesis.⁷⁶

The examination of farm numbers in Lincoln-Holland for the years 1919 to 1939 that reveals significant decreases of farms of one to 50 acres in size might be considered to be somewhat misleading. Disaggregation of this farm size category reveals a surprise: farms in the 20 to 50 acre category actually increased by 5.5 percent meaning that the fall in farm numbers, equal to 11.5 percent between 1919 and 1939 and 21 percent between 1923 and 1939, was constituted only of farms of one to 20 acres. A tendency for difficulties to have been more apparent on the smaller holdings is apparent from scrutiny of MAF documents concerning the Holbeach and Sutton Bridge smallholdings. Rent arrears were more extensive and persisted for longer on the Holbeach Estate where smallholdings averaged around ten acres than on the Sutton Bridge Estate where farms of up to 50 acres were common; the Michaelmas, 1930 rent audit shows, for example, that rent arrears at Holbeach were 15.3 percent of total

⁷⁴ Wibberley, Prof. T., 'Agriculture, Past, Present and Future', *Transactions of the Yorkshire Agricultural Society*, 80, (1922), 22-37, (p.25-6).

⁷⁵ This chapter, above.

⁷⁶ NA/MAF/48/336.

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rents whilst at Sutton Bridge they were 2.4 percent.⁷⁷ Concerns amongst smallholders that farms of fewer than 20 acres were insufficient to provide a living had arisen by as early as 1920 with a report stating that smallholders on 10 acres, as was common at Holbeach, 'have had a bad year' and it was stated that at least 20 acres with capital and horses were necessary for survival, as demonstrated by the virtually endemic inability of the smallholders to meet the rents;⁷⁸ references from 1924 onwards to vacant holdings and the 'many requests from sitting tenants for parts of them' confirm the continuing difficulties of working on acreages in the smallest size categories examined here.⁷⁹ Documents from MAF indicate that there was at least a 15 percent failure rate in smallholdings between 1918 and 1926.⁸⁰

The total fall in the numbers of one to fifty acre farms apparently arising completely from farms of one to 20 acres in Lincoln Holland is the more significant for being viewed alongside the increase of the 20 to 50 acre farms because it suggests, at first sight, that the size threshold at which farms were rendered more likely to fail was very low. Success amongst small farmers in Lincoln-Holland was more evidently possible where farms were larger, on average; one tenant, Cheesewright, on the Holbeach 'Colony' had made this plain to the estate's director in detailing the higher rents paid elsewhere for good quality land:

⁷⁷ NA/MAF/48/322; NA/MAF/48/336.

⁷⁸ NA/MAF/48/323.

⁷⁹ NA/MAF/48/336.

⁸⁰ NA/MAF/48/104.

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Cheesewright informed me that his brother was paying £5 per acre for some land 1½ miles from the Colony, which did not appear to me to be any better than our land. He gave as a reason that his brother was farming 50 acres and could consequently afford to do so.⁸¹

The example of one successful smallholder on a 50 acre holding, J. Hunt, is cited by the director of the Holbeach Estate in a collection of annual reports:

J. Hunt, who lived at Holbeach Bank, had been a persistent applicant for a holding but was unwilling to take one of the 10 acre holdings on the Holbeach Estate. He was at that time in occupation of about 7 acres of bare land [...] He obtained a 50-acre holding created at Ladyday 1927 and no tenant has pleased me more for the way in which he has rapidly improved and helped develop the holding; his farming is excellent, his homestead well ordered and trim, privet planted round his garden, lawn laid, fruit trees planted. Extra stock and implement building neatly erected; he keeps three horses (good) and always has from 40 to 60 pigs; his wife makes a special effort with poultry and these make a handsome contribution to the profits derived from the holding.⁸²

The examples of Hunt and Cheesewright certainly suggest that the larger small farms in Lincoln-Holland were able to prosper in the interwar years and point towards the necessity of some disaggregation of the categories of small farms for other counties from within and outside the arable zone. Such an

⁸¹ NA/MAF/48/323.

⁸² NA/MAF/48/336.

investigation may prove worthwhile in demonstrating the existence of a more general tendency towards interwar success amongst the larger of the small farms.

The greater success of the 20 to 50 acre farms in the arable county of Lincoln-Holland is replicated to some degree in Devon.⁸³ Brassley's observation of growth of the dairy herd in Devon,⁸⁴ whilst supportive of the assertion that interwar success was not spread evenly across the dairy industry, would also appear to undermine the argument that small farms suffered disproportionately badly in all areas; in Devon, there was only a small fall in total farm numbers between 1919 and 1939 equal to just less than 2 percent, with farms of over 50 acres increasing in number by 1.5 percent. The apparent buoyancy of agriculture in Devon was even noticed by the *Daily Mail*, which had been stressing the existence of a depression in agriculture during the summer of 1927, but still managed to conclude that dairy farmers near Plymouth could 'perhaps get along under present conditions'.⁸⁵

Devon's farms of between one and 50 acres in size declined at a rate of 4.5 percent which was considerably lower than that of many other counties examined here. Farms of between 20 and 50 acres actually showed an increase in numbers in Devon leading to the conclusion that the relatively high rate of survival of farms of this size might have been common to many counties in England and to arable farms as well as dairy farms, given the evidence seen

⁸³ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Tables 3 (pp.20-9) and 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Tables 2 (pp.10-23) and 11 (pp.38-9).

⁸⁴ Brassley, *British Farming*, pp.194-5.

⁸⁵ *Daily Mail*, 10 June 1927.

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from Lincoln-Holland. The initial assumption might be that 20 acres may have marked the point above which farms were able to survive given the particular, albeit, changing economic conditions in agriculture in England across the interwar period. However, the notion that small farms were any more economically resilient in the county is highly questionable. The rate of decline of 4.5 percent of farms of one to 50 acres in Devon would have been considerably higher but for the provision of 858 smallholdings heavily subsidised by the State and County Council.⁸⁶

Lord Ernle had commented in 1936 on the trend for small farm disappearance in the preceding 60 years and had noted in passing that maintenance of numbers of 20 to 50 acre farms was attributable to the creation of statutory smallholdings.⁸⁷ Documentary evidence reveals the considerable extent to which smallholdings, created by MAF and by County Councils as the policy of the State, were subsidised. Information sent out to County Councils in 1920 detailed how much money might be lost annually by individual Councils on each holding and refunded by the Government through MAF, the figure for a holding between 25 acres and 50 acres in size being £64; Councils were making an annual loss on existing smallholdings of £1 19 6d per acre in 1920 which would also be incurred on new resettlement schemes, costing approximately £200,000 nationally in 1919-20 and rising to £790,000 by 1925-6.⁸⁸ The following extract from a circular letter of 28 August 1919 to County Councils and

⁸⁶ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Tables 3 (pp.20-9) and 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Tables 2 (pp.10-23) and 11 (pp.38-9); Smith, N.R., *Land*, pp.234-6.

⁸⁷ Lord Ernle, p.430.

⁸⁸ NA/MAF/48/47, *Land Settlement. Cabinet Land Settlement Committee, Supply of Particulars and Information as to Working of Scheme, 1920.*

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Councils of County Boroughs in England and Wales from MAF's predecessor, the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries, makes it clear that such losses were to be expected and were, thus, part of policy:

Detailed instructions will be issued in due course as to the procedure of the payment by the Board as to any losses incurred up to the 31st March last on the whole of the smallholdings transactions of a Council to that date, and also as to the payment of annual losses at the end of this and subsequent years up to 31st March 1926.⁸⁹

Large sums of money were made available for the purchase of land to be used for smallholdings and to cover initial losses made on schemes for their creation. A letter from the Treasury to the Minister of Agriculture of 20 October 1920 demonstrates in financial terms the enthusiasm with which smallholdings were regarded within certain sections of the coalition Government of the day:

Their Lordships approve further of the proposal that the total amount to be made available for County Councils etc. in England and Wales under the Land Settlement (Facilities) Act, 1919, should be increased from £16,000,000 to £20,000,000 on the terms and conditions proposed by the Committee.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ NA/MAF/48/37.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

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A substantial portion of this expenditure was expected to be unrecoverable, according to Smith: 'Government expected to write off up to £8,000,000 or 40 percent of the authorised £20,000,000 capital outlay.'⁹¹

Owner occupation of smallholdings as a result of purchase by tenants was especially favoured by certain traditionalist rural sections of the Conservative Party and was, consequently, singled out for subsidy; the following comment dated 16 April 1925 is from the Minister of Agriculture, E.F.L. Wood, upon the conclusions drawn by the Assistant Secretary in the Ministry, H.L. French, in notes outlining the obstacles presented by the arrangements for providing loans to aspiring owners of smallholdings, as they stood at the time:

Very especially do I agree with his comments upon the present "small ownership" policy as embodied in the Acts of 1908 and 1919 and the unattractiveness it presents to the would-be small cultivator in the absence of any real sense of proprietorship, such as is so powerful in promoting industry and thrift in many continental countries. Upon such small ownership schemes the Government must be prepared to lose 33%, at any rate until the cost of building and equipment has fallen considerably below its present level [sic].⁹²

⁹¹ Smith, N.R., *Land*, p.103.

⁹² NA/MAF/48/66, *Provision of Additional Statutory Smallholdings: Memorandum on New Smallholdings Policy*.

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Owner-occupation was still being considered a possibility in the mid-1930s, with losses on loans provided by the coalition Government to set up each smallholding to be sold expected to run at between £478 and £678.⁹³

Smallholdings were subsidised by various other means, including rent abatements and the provision of experts to advise tenants on agricultural matters.⁹⁴ H.L. French was noting in a memo of 10 January 1931 that it would be advisable not to let heavily subsidised smallholders, drawn, in a 'novel experiment', from the urban unemployed, to be left to 'sink or swim'.⁹⁵ By 1935, £20,750,000 had been spent on land acquisition and capital expenditure for smallholdings under the Smallholdings and Allotments Act 1908 and the Land Settlement (Facilities) Act 1919.⁹⁶ Venn calculated in 1934 in his Presidential Address to the Agricultural Economics Society that the losses made over time on loans created by the Government to establish smallholdings would run for 70 years: 'The overall average annual payment will be £565,000, approximately equal to £34 per holding.'⁹⁷ £34 per year was a considerable sum of money, especially when it is considered in the light of agricultural workers going on strike in Norfolk in 1923 over whether they were to be paid £1 5 shillings per week, or £65 per year.⁹⁸

⁹³ NA/MAF/48/280, *Commission for the Special Areas (England and Wales): Agricultural Policy 1934-5*.

⁹⁴ NA/MAF/48/324, *Holbeach Farm Settlements, Annual Reports, 1924-39 (Crown Colony Holdings)*.

⁹⁵ NA/MAF/48/88, *Agricultural Land (Utilisation) Bill, 1931, Advisory Committee on Small Holdings for the Unemployed*.

⁹⁶ NA/MAF/48/104.

⁹⁷ Venn, J.A., 'Presidential Address. The State and Agriculture', *Journal of the Proceedings of the Agricultural Economics Society*, 3 1, (1934), 13-24, (p.13).

⁹⁸ Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men*, p.156.

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The disappearance of farms of one to 50 acres in size across the interwar period has already been shown in this thesis to have been made to appear less significant by the addition of numbers of smallholdings created by the State to the yearly totals of such farms but it would appear that the category of farms of 20 to 50 acres is the one that will have been most affected. Figures calculated from Smith show that the average size of the 10,574 smallholdings created in England and Wales between 1919 and 1920 was 22.5 acres and that the average of the 1,650 provided between 1932 and 1937 was 20 acres.⁹⁹ The calculations make it clear that a large proportion of the smallholdings created in the interwar years would have contributed to the total numbers of holdings in the category of 20 to 50 acre farms which, in Lincoln-Holland and Devon, seem to have been able to prosper in the interwar years. Documents from MAF reveal that the smallholdings created in Devon between 1918 and 1920 averaged just over 25 acres each.¹⁰⁰ Small farms were not immune to failure in Devon, despite heavy subsidies for smallholdings; the county's farms of one to five acres and of five to 20 acres still declined at significant rates, these being 18.5 percent and 10.5 percent respectively. The conclusion must be made that the rate of disappearance of smallholdings and, especially, of small farms of 20 to 50 acres as shown in the *Agricultural Statistics* between 1919 and 1939 and, especially, between 1923 and 1939 would have been noticeably higher without subsidy.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Smith, N.R., *Land*, pp.234-6.

¹⁰⁰ NA/MAF/48/47.

¹⁰¹ Table 5.9; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Table 3 (pp.20-9) and Table 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1923, Vol. 58*, Table 2 (pp.21-36) and Table 5 (pp.42-3); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Table 2 (pp.10-23) and Table 11 (pp.38-9); Smith, N.R., *Land*, pp.234-6.

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The conclusion that interwar numbers of farms of 20 to 50 acres were maintained through subsidy is supported by evidence from counties within the arable zone and pastoral zone other than Lincoln-Holland and Devon, respectively. A marked coincidence existed between large numbers of state-subsidised smallholdings and proportionally low falls in numbers of farms in the 20 to 50 acre size category. The arable county of Norfolk was home to 2,067 smallholdings in 1932 making it the county with the second highest total number of statutory smallholdings in the country with only the Isle of Ely, with 2,145, having more.¹⁰² Norfolk showed little change in numbers of holdings of 20 to 50 acres but substantial disappearance of farms of between one and 20 acres, suggesting that smallholding subsidies were disguising the difficult conditions that have been seen in much of England in this study that actually extended to small farms in parts of the arable region.¹⁰³

The pattern seen in Lincoln-Holland, Devon and Norfolk is repeated elsewhere. Devon's small farm numbers have been seen to have benefited from smallholdings supported by subsidy but it was not the only county in the pastoral area which had large numbers of statutory smallholdings. Farms of 20 to 50 acres in Gloucestershire, where 900 smallholdings had been created by the State,¹⁰⁴ declined at a significantly lower rate than farms of one to 20 acres. These statistics suggest strongly that smallholdings of 20 to 50 acres subsidised by the State compensated numerically for the failure of existing farms in this size category in the western dairy counties. This suggestion is reinforced by statistics

¹⁰² Smith, N.R., *Land*, pp.234-6.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*; Table 5.7; Table 5.8; Table 5.9.

¹⁰⁴ Table 3.2; Table 5.2; Smith, N.R., *Land*, pp.235-6.

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that show that low levels of smallholding creation in the north of England existed where failure of 20 to 50 acre farms was high. Lancashire's 20 to 50 acre farms fell by 19 percent between 1919 and 1939 and only 63 farms had been created there between 1918 and 1920 whilst the North Riding saw only 39 smallholdings created between 1918 and 1920 but saw an 11 percent fall in numbers of 20 to 50 acre farms. Figures for the West Riding show that the creation of 196 subsidised smallholdings between 1918 and 1920 would have increased the numbers of small farms by only 1 percent and, despite these additions averaging over 20 acres in size, farms of 20 to 50 acres fell by 18 percent.¹⁰⁵

The ways in which economic conditions were affecting agriculture and creating small farm failure in the northern dairy counties were replicated by those in the western dairy counties and in the eastern arable counties but with the apparent failure of farms outside of the northern counties being ameliorated by the survival of smallholdings on the basis of State subsidy. The apparent success of farms of 20 to 50 acres in Lincoln-Holland is tempered by the realization of the county having had the fifth highest total of statutory smallholdings in England in 1932 at 1,376. Its farms of between 20 and 50 acres increased by 5.5 percent between 1919 and 1939 but its total number of farms was only 5,412 in 1931 meaning that around a quarter of its farms would have been established using State subsidy with many of the subsidised farms falling into the 20 to 50 acre size category. Farms of between five and 20 acres in Lincoln-Holland fell at a rate of 29 percent between 1923 and 1939 and these

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., pp.234-6; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Tables 3 (pp.20-9) and 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Tables 2 (pp.10-23) and 11 (pp.38-9).

falls, along with falls of farms of one to five acres of 26.5 percent, demonstrate that if subsidy was working at all for the smallest farms, large numbers of existing farmers working without subsidy must have fallen victim to the difficult conditions of interwar agriculture. Farmers farming without subsidy must also have failed in the 20 to 50 acre category since the increase of 10 percent of these farms between 1919 and 1931 was followed by a 4 percent fall by 1939.¹⁰⁶

The subsidies examined, above, were intended specifically for the creation of smallholdings. They could only work in the interwar years to stabilise the numbers of small farms that appeared in the *Agricultural Statistics* for locations where they actually were used relatively extensively to finance the creation of smallholdings, such as Lincoln-Holland, Norfolk, Devon and Gloucestershire. The average size of the smallholdings that were created being 20 acres and above indicates that a good proportion of them would have been contributing to the category representing the larger small farms, that of farms of between 20 and 50 acres in size; it is the numbers in this category for the counties mentioned that showed the least tendency to fall when compared to the other counties examined in this study and, in the cases of Lincoln-Holland and Devon, numbers actually rose. The effectiveness of subsidies in maintaining larger small farm numbers in these counties is demonstrated by the contrast between the successes mentioned and the falls in numbers of larger small farms that took

¹⁰⁶ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Table 3 (pp.20-9) and Table 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1923, Vol. 58*, Table 2 (pp.21-36) and Table 5 (pp.42-3); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Table 2 (pp.10-23) and Table 11 (pp.38-9); Smith, N.R., *Land*, pp.234-6; Table 5.9.

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place where relatively few smallholdings were created, such as in the North Riding, West Riding and Lancashire.

Evidence suggests that numbers of the larger small farms could be maintained in some counties during the interwar years by the creation of smallholdings irrespective of the type of farming that was being undertaken in any area where smallholdings were numerous, whether this was the arable region home to Lincoln-Holland and Norfolk or the pastoral region in which dairy farming was common and expanding, as was the case in Devon and Gloucester. Such stable or increasing farm numbers in this 20 to 50 acre category caused by the increasing smallholding numbers are likely to have been compensating for the disappearance of established farms in all farming types, if evidence of falls in farm numbers in this category in other counties is considered. Evidence on falling cattle numbers from Lincoln-Holland indicates that existing small dairy farms may have been failing, just as they can be seen to have been in the Pennine counties, whereas the maintenance of the arable area indicates that subsidised smallholdings may have compensated numerically for the disappearance of existing small arable farms; it is almost certainly the case that some part of the fall in farms of one to 20 acres was made up of dairy farms in Lincoln-Holland and elsewhere. The likely explanation for the comparatively reduced disappearance of 20 to 50 acre dairy farms in the western counties of Devon and Gloucestershire is that, again, smallholding creation compensated numerically for the disappearance of existing farms. Subsidy allowed larger smallholdings to compete to some extent with the larger farms that were encroaching on the milk market, both in western England and in the eastern

arable counties where dairy herds increased even where arable reductions were comparatively low.¹⁰⁷

Smallholdings, once established, could not disappear from the *Agricultural Statistics* because they were over-subscribed, as Smith makes clear: 'The number of post-War applicants provided with holdings is larger than the number of holdings provided since some left the holdings and others took their places.'¹⁰⁸ Thus, it is clear that the small farms disappearing from the *Agricultural Statistics* during the interwar period had been an established part of English agriculture. Note should also be taken that since 24,319 smallholders had occupied 16,700 holdings created between the First World War and March 31 1926, there were 7,619 small farmers who had disappeared who, since they were not in themselves, farm holdings, would never register in the *Agricultural Statistics* but ought to be recognised as, possibly, having failed as small farmers.¹⁰⁹

Smallholdings subsidies were not nearly as effective in reducing the appearance of the severity of falls in numbers of farms of less than 20 acres in extent in any of the counties examined in this study as they were for farms of 20 to 50 acres; falls in the size of the population of this category may have been made to look less severe by the creation of smallholdings but not sufficiently so as to make a 25 percent fall in their numbers in England look like anything less than serious agricultural failure. Clearly there was a level below which subsidy could not provide adequate numbers of smallholders to maintain numbers to

¹⁰⁷ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Tables 3 (pp.20-9) and 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Tables 2 (pp.10-23) and 11 (pp.38-9).

¹⁰⁸ Smith, N.R., *Land*, p.105.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

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replace the numbers of small farmers going out of business. It is important to recognise that the size level below which farms were likely to struggle was around fifty acres because, despite the effects of subsidised smallholdings in diluting the disappearance of the 20 to 50 acre holdings, the numbers in England of these larger small farms did still suffer overall a 10.5 percent reduction.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

Whetham's characterization of pastoral agriculture in England as extending further southwards and eastwards at times of agricultural hardship can be seen to have some very basic merit in terms of interwar farming but, in actuality, to misinterpret the situation through considerable understatement.¹¹¹ The expansion of milk production took place in all the counties examined in this thesis which are drawn from all over England, demonstrated by increases in numbers of dairy cattle of extents varying from 6 percent to 45 percent. Taylor had commented in 1987 upon the increases in dairying in most areas in the 1920s but had failed to observe the impact of the increases in terms of the farm size structure of agriculture, concentrating mainly on the changing geography of milk production. Accompanying the ubiquitous expansion of milk production was a pervasive change in the farm size structure; small farms, traditionally associated with dairy production, disappeared at disproportionately high rates in all counties.

¹¹⁰ Table 3.2; Table 3.3; Smith, N.R., *Land*, pp.235-6.

¹¹¹ Whetham, *Agrarian History*, p.29.

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The assertion that dairy farming was a panacea for farmers in the interwar period was challenged in Chapter Four of this work. Evidence has been presented in this chapter which supports that challenge. Growth in output in the dairy industry did not guarantee survival, let alone success, for many farmers but especially for those on small-scale farms. The opportunities for profiting from milk production traditionally associated with small farms were no longer easily available. Falls in numbers of small-scale farms between 1919 and 1939 demonstrate that, increasingly, such farms became less able to compete in the market for fresh milk because of falling prices caused by larger scale farmers turning to the dairy market in greater numbers as a means either of remaining in business or of increasing profits. The result, seen in Pennine counties and detailed in Chapter Four, was a pattern of shrinkage of arable acreages and increase in cattle numbers and this has been seen in this chapter to have occurred elsewhere across England but on an exaggerated scale. The same pattern is seen in counties in the pastoral regions of the North, West and Midlands as well as in the traditionally arable area of the South and East but with relatively larger increases taking place in dairy cattle numbers than those seen in the Pennine counties. The entry into milk production of large-scale farmers who had formerly been uninterested in dairy farming was experienced across England. Local markets for fresh milk, virtually monopolised previously by the small-scale milk producers traditionally associated with dairy farming, were invaded by local large-scale farmers and by farmers from further afield causing increasing difficulties for the small-scale farmers and leading, ultimately, to their failure and the disappearance of many of their farms. Small farm numbers fell in

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all the counties examined. The nature of the changes discovered here begins to cast light on the evidence given earlier in this thesis of the contradiction between the disproportionately high incidence of the interwar disappearance of small farms and the relative prosperity of the dairy farming upon which much of it had traditionally been undertaken. Small farms were being driven out of business because the type of farming in which many of them specialised was increasingly being dominated by big producers.

The difficulties of small dairy farmers in Lincoln-Holland where cattle numbers fell by 22 percent can act as a barometer for small dairy farmers as a whole, as it can for the experience of small farmers engaged in arable farming. Lincoln-Holland is the only county to have been examined, here, to have witnessed an increase in the proportion of its interwar arable acreage suggesting that there was little pressure from within the county on small farmers in dairy production from large farmers looking for an alternative to arable farming. Small farms likely to be involved in dairy farming still fell by 11.5 percent in Lincoln-Holland between 1919 and 1939, a figure that would have been higher but for the introduction of significant numbers of State subsidised smallholders that helped maintain small farm numbers. Smallholding creation merely makes small farm disappearance appear to have been a less serious problem than its actuality and a lack of attention to it has had a serious effect in disguising the difficulties of farmers on the larger small farms of 20 to 50 acres in the arable region as well as in the Western pastoral counties of Devon and Gloucestershire.

The existence of subsidised smallholdings obscures the fact that the significant falls actually taking place in small farm numbers were very likely to have been either of farmers who had been established in farming before the introduction of entitlement to the State aid granted to smallholders or of farmers who had, simply, been established without it. The replacement of established farmers in the *Agricultural Statistics* by smallholders has had the effect of minimising problems that existed for farmers within the dairy industry and this has contributed to allowing this branch of agriculture to be represented as an interwar success. Dairy farming on small farms was becoming increasingly difficult and it is hard to believe that unsubsidised dairy farms of less than 50 acres were truly, economically viable in England by the end of the interwar period or would have remained so without the intervention of the State managed cultivation of all available land made necessary by the Second World War.¹¹²

Little reason exists to suspect that the increase of two percent in the proportion of farmland under arable in Lincoln-Holland was of any joy to small farmers, given both the difficulties that high levels of small farm disappearance make it clear that small farmers were facing and the evidence on difficulties encountered on non-dairy smallholdings. Documentary evidence examined above implies that for arable farmers to have had any kind of success, they would have had to be farming in excess of 50 acres since it is only at 50 acres that smallholdings, and thus, farms in general, appear to have been viable; even so, such farms appear only to have prospered with the benefit of State subsidy.

¹¹² Short, 'Social Impact', p.172.

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Farms of above 50 acres do, indeed, appear to have prospered, at least in terms relative to the fortunes of small farms. Average farm size increased across both the pastoral and arable regions of England and rates of failure were well below those of small farms. Much of any decrease in numbers of the largest of the large farms of above 150 acres can be seen to be significantly due to break-up of large holdings for the creation of smallholdings; thus, it can be seen that the creation of smallholdings can lead to underestimation of the decline of small farms and overestimation of the same for large farms. Little has been said of the categories of farms of 50 to 150 acres which fall into the 'large' farm category but can be referred to as 'medium' size because they cover the average sizes of farm in 1919 in all of the counties examined, here, outside of the Pennine counties and Lincoln-Holland. These farms generally maintained their numbers because they rarely appear to have been bought by County Councils for smallholding creation because they did not cover an adequate area and were popular amongst farmers.¹¹³

The difficulties of small farmers and smallholders in both arable and dairy farming were not experienced to anything like the same extent on these medium sized large farms and their numbers fluctuated slightly across the interwar period in England but were virtually the same in 1939 as they had been in 1919; given falls in overall numbers of farms, this means that they actually constituted a larger percentage of total farms and covered a greater percentage of the agricultural area in the latter year. Even the largest farms, despite their popularity for splitting-up into smallholdings, covered a greater proportion of the

¹¹³ NA/MAF/48/75.

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agricultural acreage in 1939 than in 1919. The amount of land covered by farms of various sizes is notoriously difficult to ascertain but figures calculated from Venn and from Astor show that the proportion of agricultural land on farms of one to 50 acres had fallen from 16.5 percent to 12 percent between 1921 and 1938 whilst farms of over fifty acres occupied the other 88 percent, up from 83.5.¹¹⁴ These figures simply reinforce the conclusion that the size below which farms became difficult to be made to pay was 50 acres.

Mention should be given to the very largest category of farms in Lincoln-Holland, those of over 300 acres, within which numbers rose by 5 percent between 1919 and 1939 alongside an increase in the proportional arable acreage which took place despite falls elsewhere. This was in a county from the east of England that was renowned for the arable production that was reputedly the province of large farms and which has been used by twentieth century historians to create a narrative of interwar agricultural depression.¹¹⁵ West Suffolk was another arable county that saw no fall in the numbers of farms of over 300 acres, numbers being the same in 1939 as they had been in 1920.¹¹⁶ Increases of these large farms were occurring in the eastern region that specialised in cereal growing but there is incongruousness between these figures and the historiography, just as there is with much other contemporary evidence; for example, a memorandum from the MAF Special Committee on Agricultural Policy from 1930 states,

¹¹⁴ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p.359; Venn, 1923, *Foundations*, p.63.

¹¹⁵ Chapter 1, above.

¹¹⁶ MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1920*, Vol.55, Table 10 (pp.42-3); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939*, Vol.74, Table 11 (pp.38-9).

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If there is any justification for the use of such words as “calamity” or “collapse” as a picture of the immediate future, such description should most certainly not be applied to the agricultural industry as a whole but can only be intended as representing the prospects of farmers and men dependent on the cultivation of certain areas in East Anglia and possibly three or four other well-defined districts in the south of England.¹¹⁷

The twenty-first century historiography of the interwar years has stressed that the 1930s saw improvements in the conditions in agriculture but has failed to recognise that the benefits were felt only by larger scale farmers.¹¹⁸ The causes of such incongruousness and absences in matters pertaining to large-scale farms are the subject of the final chapter of this thesis.

¹¹⁷ NA/MAF/38/18.

¹¹⁸ Chapter 1, above.

Chapter 6: The Unequal Effects of State Support upon Large and Small Farms

Introduction

Attention has been paid in Chapter Five of this study to the Government subsidies that were used to create smallholdings which had the effect of shoring up small farm numbers during the interwar years, thereby reducing the appearance of failure amongst small farms and, as a result, of all farms. The temporary reduction in the rates of failure of small farms simply demonstrates the increasing difficulties of surviving on farms of less than 50 acres in extent. Recognition is necessary that the money spent was not intended as a subsidy to existing small farm business owners but was designed actually to expand the numbers of the owners of such businesses, that is, small-scale farmers. By introducing new cultivators into agriculture, creation of smallholdings could only create further competition in agriculture and cannot, therefore, be seen as support for the industry; however, a number of pieces of legislation were introduced by Governments that were intended to benefit the practitioners of British agriculture across the interwar years and it is the contention of this chapter that the major instruments of support were designed in such a way that they were of far greater benefit to large-scale farmers than to small-scale ones. Thus, small farm numbers were artificially inflated but aid to existing small farms was not to be found.

The two branches of agriculture upon which legislation had the most effect were the arable farmers who grew wheat and the large-scale farmers in

the dairy industry; the significant legislation affecting them was passed in 1932 and 1933, respectively. Further legislation to subsidise and protect agriculture was also passed in the 1930s so that it can be argued that, despite some piecemeal legislation that may have given some indirect support to agriculture in the 1920s, English farmers moved from being in a position of free trade in the 1920s to one of being substantially supported in the 1930s.¹ The influence of this change on farms of contrasting scale and the assertion that large-scale farmers were its greater beneficiaries will be assessed by comparing trends in movements of the numbers of farms in differing size categories in the two decades. Documentary evidence relating to the effects of the measures used to support agriculture will also be assessed.

The chapter will conclude with a demonstration of the extent to which the issues of concern to small farms were ignored as a result of the exaggeration of a single issue that was directly of relevance only to those farmers who were, in general, on holdings of 50 acres or more in size: the employment of agricultural workers. Farmers and landowners, as well as other interest groups that formed a rural hegemonic bloc, demonised workers and exaggerated farmers' economic difficulties which they claimed emanated from the level of wages that they were forced by the State to pay to workers and by the mediation of the State in relationships between farmers and their employees. The result was that Government policies that were supposedly designed to ameliorate general agricultural difficulties were, actually, provided as a form of compensation to large-scale farmers who benefited at the expense of small farms.

¹ Orwin, *English Farming*, pp.88-91.

Contrasts in Fortune between 1919 and 1931 and between 1931 and 1939

Considerable contrast in the percentages of farms disappearing in England might be expected to be found between the twelve year period of 1919 to 1931 and the eight years from 1931 to 1939. These periods are not equal in length and this must be taken into consideration when comparisons are made between the two, but the rationale for the separation of the interwar period into these two unequal shorter periods can be found in the differences of approach taken by British Governments during each period and, thus, in the anticipated findings. The year of 1931 saw the Government's approach to agriculture change and the first Marketing Act was introduced which facilitated economic protection but, more importantly, embodied the acceptability of the concept of protection in legislation so that the possibility of protection became a reality beyond simply being an item of endless discussion.² Most importantly, the period from 1919 to 1931 was one in which the State intervened very little to support agriculture in a direct fashion whereas the period after 1931 was one in which support for the industry was introduced in some way for all products and became the enduring norm, rather than the exception.³ The difference in the length of the two periods will be highlighted during discussion of the analysis, where necessary.

Direct support for agriculture had continued after the First World War in the shape of the Corn Production Act of 1917 and its successor, the Agriculture Act of 1920, but these had been swiftly curtailed in 1921 in what has become

² Smith, M.J., *Agricultural Support*, pp.57-8.

³ Winter, pp.83-99.

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known as the 'Great Betrayal' of British agriculture.⁴ Support given to agriculture from then until the 1930s was restricted and targeted at specific groups. Some support was given from the Beet Sugar Subsidy Act of 1925 to arable farmers who found themselves located on suitable growing land.⁵ The Agricultural Credits Act of 1923 was intended to equip farmers who had recently purchased farms with short-term credit whilst the Agricultural Credits Act of 1928 was to provide reasonably cheap mortgages to farmers through the newly established and lightly subsidised agricultural Mortgage Corporation.⁶ The tax of local rates on agricultural land, halved once in 1895, had been halved again in 1923 and completely removed in 1929.⁷

The Agricultural Marketing Acts of 1931 and 1933 allowed for the restriction of imports and home produce and led, notably, to the creation of Marketing Boards for hops, milk, potatoes and bacon.⁸ The Milk Marketing Board, formed in 1933, was the most important immediate result of the Marketing Acts if only because milk, having the largest gross output of any single agricultural product throughout the 1930s,⁹ had become the most important product to British agriculture.¹⁰ Other legislation had been or was, consequently, enacted to support farmers. The Wheat Act of 1932 which offered subsidies to

⁴ Whetham, "Great Betrayal", pp.36-49.

⁵ Whetham, *Agrarian History*, pp.165-9.

⁶ NA/MAF/53/64; *Farmer, Stock Breeder and Agricultural Gazette*, 20 May 1929.

⁷ NA/MAF/48/555, *Agricultural Rates Bill and Act, 1929*; Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p.379; Lord Ernle, p.418.

⁸ Orwin, *English Farming*, p.91.

⁹ Total livestock and wool together had a greater output than milk but they formed a combination of products and, anyway, the gap was small by 1939. Whetham, *Agrarian History*, p.260.

¹⁰ Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, p.54; Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p.251.

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producers was, when considering the ideological and economic implications of a subsidy to large-scale but comparatively inefficient producers, the most significant piece of legislation but it was only a part of the support given to farmers. Agriculture had been assisted by the placing of low tariffs on imports of flowers, fruit, vegetables, barley, oats, eggs and dairy products under the 1931 Horticultural Products (Emergency Duties) Act. Import restrictions on meat were introduced in 1932 and subsidies were established for beef in 1934 under the Cattle Act and established for the long-term in 1936. The Agriculture Acts of 1937 and 1939 subsidised fertilizers and offered minimum price guarantees for oats and barley.¹¹

Chapters Four and Five of this study have demonstrated that the move into dairy production of large-scale farms across England had increased competition in the milk market, driving down prices with serious implications for small-scale farmers, many of whom went out of business and disappeared from the industry along with their holdings; increases between 1919 and 1939 in average farm size in counties across England and a shrinkage of the acreage under crops and grass¹² indicate that disappearing holdings ceased to function as individual farms and that the land either was amalgamated into other farms or reverted to waste where it was not appropriated as building land.¹³ Increased competition and lower prices affected small farmers located, not only in the

¹¹ NA/MAF/48/558, *Mr. D. Lloyd George's "New Deal" Proposals Regarding Agriculture 1935*; Martin, *Development*, pp.23-8; Rooth, T., *British Protectionism and the International Economy: Overseas Commercial Policy in the 1930s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.212-38; Brown, *Agriculture*, pp.112-122; Rooth, T., 'Trade Agreements and the Evolution of British Agricultural Policy in the 1930s', *Agricultural History Review*, 33 2, (1985), 173-90, (p.174); Orwin, *English Farming*, p.91.

¹² Table 3.1; Table 3.2.

¹³ Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, pp.56, 64.

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traditional dairy counties, but also in the grazing counties in the pastoral region and in the arable region where milk production has also been shown to have increased. The previously profitable dairy industry was in disarray by 1933¹⁴ and it was at this point that milk producers voted to use the powers granted to agricultural producers under the Agricultural Marketing Acts of 1933 to set up the Milk Marketing Board (MMB) in an attempt to regulate production and stabilise prices.¹⁵

The preceding two chapters have produced evidence to show that the many small farms in England that disappeared between 1919 and 1939 did so as a result of large-scale farmers entering into milk production during the 1920s. The act of creation of the MMB in 1933 might be thought, logically, to have been action taken as a result of the distress amongst small-scale farmers that is demonstrated by the significant falls in numbers of small farms across all of these regions. Any benefits to be derived by small farmers from the MMB would expect to be manifested in a falling rate of small farm disappearance. Other support given to farmers during the 1930s may have been of assistance to small-scale farmers, including the Cattle Act for livestock farmers; however, the Wheat Act of 1932 was the other major piece of legislation that might be expected to have had benefits that extended to small-scale farmers, if only because of the significant numbers of them existent in the arable region of England better known for its large farms. Cereal growers have attracted considerable attention in the written history of the interwar years, particularly with regard to the

¹⁴ Whetham, *Agrarian History*, p.250.

¹⁵ Baker, pp.71-3.

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circumstances of the withdrawal of subsidy of cereal production in 1921.¹⁶ The major reason why small farmers might be expected to have benefited to some extent from payments to wheat farming in the interwar years is that they constituted very close to two-thirds of the total number of farmers so that they, themselves, might reasonably have expected to benefit from payments that constituted 80 percent of the total State money devoted to interwar subsidy of agriculture.¹⁷

The expectation that State aid to farmers would have had some influence in reducing the rate at which farms disappeared from the *Agricultural Statistics* in the 1930s compared to the 1920s as the aid grew in abundance during the 1930s is confounded. The decline in net farm numbers continued and actually increased so that, between 1931 and 1939, almost 8.5 percent of farms disappeared whereas just over 6 percent had disappeared between 1919 and 1931.¹⁸ However, it should be taken into account that interwar creation of smallholdings is not represented in these figures, as noted in Chapter Three.¹⁹ Smallholding creation had some effect in maintaining small farm numbers in the 1920s so that gross decline of small farms was, in reality, about 14.5 percent which is much closer to the net decline of the 1930s of just under 12.5 percent which is, in itself, a slight underestimate since some smallholdings were also created in the 1930s.²⁰

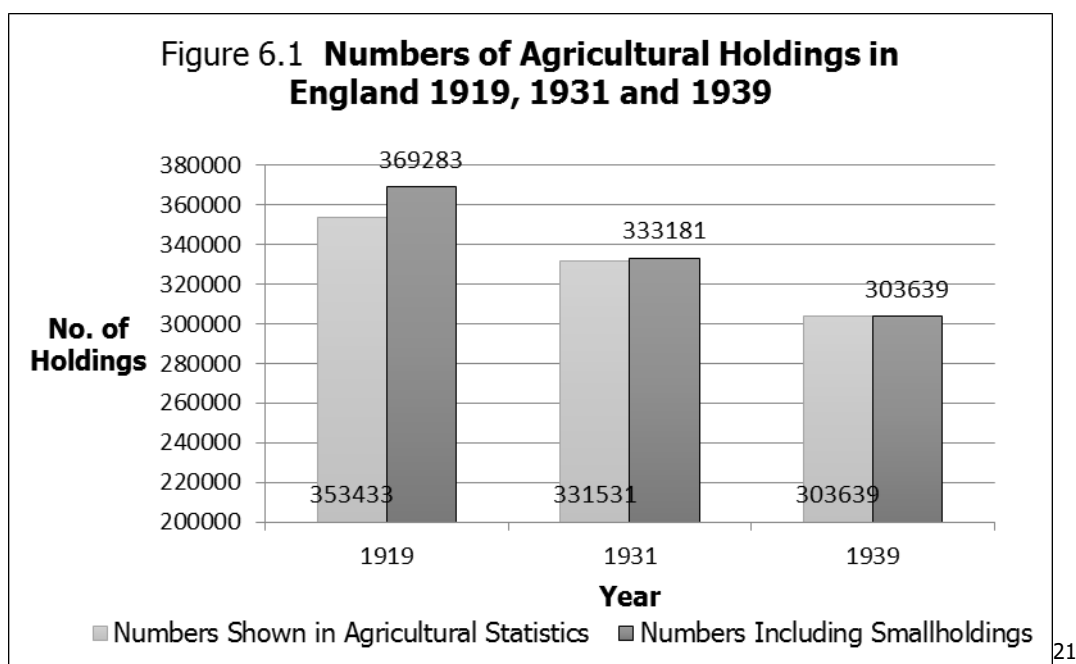
¹⁶ Penning-Rowsell, pp.176-94; Moore, pp.155-68; Cooper, 'Another Look', pp.81-104; Whetham, "'Great Betrayal'", pp.36-49.

¹⁷ Self and Storing, p.19.

¹⁸ Figure 6.1.

¹⁹ Chapter 3, above.

²⁰ Figure 6.1.



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The taking into account of smallholding creation results in the rate of disappearance of all farms between 1919 and 1931 rising to 9 percent whilst the figure for 1931 to 1939 increases to a little above 9 percent. Recognition should, however, be made that the earlier period analysed here is a third longer than the latter so the rate of disappearance in the earlier period in terms of farms disappearing per year is considerably lower than that of the period 1931 to 1939. This indicates in terms purely of numbers of failing farms of all sizes that there

²¹ The figures for 'Numbers Shown in Agricultural Statistics' originate in the *Agricultural Statistics*, as cited here. In order that the estimated 'gross' total of farms in existence between 1919 and 1931 can be represented here, 'Numbers Including Smallholdings' for 1919 is a composite figure made up of the total number of holdings shown in *Agricultural Statistics* for 1919 and the number of smallholdings created between 1919 and 1931. 'Numbers Including Smallholdings' for 1931 is the gross total number of holdings in existence between 1931 and 1939, made up of the total holdings shown in *Agricultural Statistics* for 1931 added to the number of smallholdings created from 1932 to 1939. 'Numbers Including Smallholdings' for 1939 includes all smallholdings in existence in 1939 (see Chapter 3 for further explanation). Figures exclude data for Monmouth. MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol. 54*, Table 10, pp.38-9; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1931, Vol.66*, Table 8, pp.64-5; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Table 11 (pp.38-9); Smith, N.R., *Land*, p.234.

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was no benefit to farms, overall, in the 1930s from increased State aid to agriculture; in fact, the period of State aid saw relatively greater decline in total numbers of farms as well as of small farms.²²

Chapter Three has shown that a quite dramatic contrast existed between the fortunes of small farms and large farms in England in terms of their chances of survival between 1919 and 1939. Farms of over 50 acres in size decreased in numbers at a relatively low rate of just over 3 percent whilst the net rate of fall in small farms of one to 50 acres was of 20 percent, the gross rate being at least 25.5.²³ There is a striking contrast to be found between the fortunes of the two groups of farms of over and under 50 acres when the years 1919 to 1931 are contrasted with those between 1931 and 1939.

The statistics make it clear that small farms in England actually saw their numbers fall at a higher rate during the period when Government had put in place measures intended to support and protect home agriculture than in the preceding twelve years. The larger farms saw the percentage decrease in their numbers fall in the latter years from a figure that was already comparatively low at just under 3 percent to under 1.5; the opposite was true for farms of one to 50 acres, however, which saw the 8.5 percent net decrease in their numbers between 1919 and 1931 increase to 12.5 percent between 1931 and 1939. The net rate at which small farms disappeared during the period of Government support was higher than the period without support by a considerable margin and was almost 1.5 times as great: 3 small farms disappeared in the eight years

²² Figure 6.1; Smith, N.R., *Land*, pp.234-6.

²³ Table 3.3; Chapter 3, above.

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between 1931 and 1939 for every 2 that had disappeared in the twelve years from 1919 to 1931.²⁴ These figures do not suggest in any way that small farms felt the benefits of the increased Government protection and support that were introduced in the 1930s. The following section will examine the contribution to English agriculture of the Milk Marketing Board in terms of its relative effects on numbers of small and large farms.

The Effect of the Milk Marketing Board on Interwar Agriculture

The creation of the MMB in 1933 took place at the culmination of a period of problems for dairy farmers which resulted from prices of milk beginning to fall from 1929 onwards; in particular, farmers in more remote locations had found that the prices they were receiving for the milk that they were accustomed to selling for manufacturing purposes had fallen, forcing them to send their milk by train to risk the daily liquid milk prices in urban 'accommodation' markets.²⁵ Evidence presented here has shown that the interwar years saw serious numbers of failures of small farms and it has been demonstrated in this chapter that a large number of these failures took place during the period between 1931 and 1939.

Taylor has cited one author, M. Messer, who wrote in a slightly contradictory manner in 1937 that there had appeared to be very little sign of hardship affecting dairy farmers in 1931, even though he notes that producer

²⁴ Table 3.3; Figure 6.1.

²⁵ Chapter 4, above.

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retailers had been experiencing difficulties collecting the money they were owed.²⁶ The inconsistency between the evidence presented here and Messer's narrative is explicable by the suggestion that the full effects of problems in the dairy industry had not yet become apparent at the particular point in 1931 to which he was referring, particularly when Whetham's figures on the timing of price falls are taken into consideration; these show that the serious fall in prices only really began in the year between June 1930 and May 1931,²⁷ well into the period between 1929 to 1933, with the problems they were causing not becoming noteworthy until sometime later, after the point in time which Messer was observing, a common occurrence in agriculture.²⁸ Messer is slightly contradictory in suggesting that, despite the lack of obvious problems for dairy farmers, producer retailers had begun to have problems maintaining their income streams in 1931.²⁹ This suggestion is however consistent with the subsequent disappearance of considerable numbers of small farms from the *Agricultural Statistics* that has been shown to have occurred between 1931 and 1939 because it has been shown that many small farmers ranked amongst producer retailers.³⁰ The obvious conclusion that must be drawn from this is that a considerable portion of the disappearance of small dairy farmers that has been demonstrated to have taken place did so after 1931 and under the aegis of the MMB and, thus, that the MMB which is praised, though sometimes

²⁶ Taylor, D., p.62.

²⁷ Whetham, *Agrarian History*, p.251.

²⁸ Shirlaw, D.W.G., *An Agricultural Geography of Great Britain* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1966), p.9.

²⁹ Taylor, D., p.62.

³⁰ Chapter 4, above.

grudgingly,³¹ for the job it did in stabilising the milk industry, did not work very well in the interests of small-scale farmers.

The MMB was established as a result of the difficulties experienced by farmers for whom the sale of milk for manufacturing purposes had been usual before the falls in prices for such milk occurred as a result of the collapse in world cheese and butter prices in 1929; Whetham's figures demonstrate that these problems really began in earnest in 1930 to 1931.³² Messer noted that there were signs of problems in 1931 in the county of Dorset which borders Devon in Western England, where dairy farms were on the large side when compared to the northern dairy farms; Dorset farmers were known for selling milk for manufacture into butter until a move into the liquid milk market was precipitated by the collapsing prices.³³ Producers of milk for manufacturing tended to be the larger dairy farms which were further from urban centres and more remote so that the possibility of taking advantage of local liquid milk markets was rare; Mansfield has located the Marches as another of the remoter areas of the pastoral region in which larger dairy farms became accustomed to selling manufacturing milk in the 1920s, sending milk to be processed in cheese factories in Shropshire which had a great cheese tradition but poor urban links.³⁴ The struggles of such larger-farm suppliers of manufacturing milk accords with their farmers turning to the Marketing Acts of 1931 and 1933 in order to create the MMB as a means of their own salvation.

³¹ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, p.275.

³² Whetham, *Agrarian History*, p.251.

³³ Taylor, D., p.62.

³⁴ Mansfield, *English Farmworkers*, p.22.

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The MMB was intended to eliminate fluctuations in prices in the milk market. The dramatic falls in the price paid for manufacturing milk from 1929 to 1933 to the 'ruinously low' 5d per gallon,³⁵ had they been allowed to persist without the intervention of the Board, would have continued in their effect on the liquid milk market as producers of manufacturing milk continued to switch to it in desperation, increasing supply in a market of static demand, driving down prices. The MMB was voted for by farmers and its personnel were elected by farmers. It was given control over levels of milk production and no farmer could sell milk without a licence from the Board. The Board was guaranteed to be paid a certain price by Government for all the milk that was produced, based on prices in the open market for both liquid and manufacturing milk, and an average of these two prices was then paid to the producer and was known as the 'wholesale' or 'effective guaranteed' price.³⁶ It is, thus, clear that farmers formerly producing for the manufacturing market, who tended to be large scale, would see the prices paid to them rise.³⁷ The opposite is true for the producers of retail milk, as the first Reorganization Commission for Milk had made clear in 1933: 'Producers who sell milk for liquid consumption will, under our scheme, be contributing to raise the price of milk sold for manufacture';³⁸ the larger amongst the retailers might have been glad of the stability that was brought to milk prices by the Board. Some producers had been, according to the trade journal of the MMB, *Home Farmer*, on the point of withdrawing milk from the market altogether in protest at the low prices offered to them in 1932 and were referred

³⁵ Baker, p.91.

³⁶ Ibid., p.136.

³⁷ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p.275.

³⁸ MAF, *Economic Series No.38*, p.107.

to as 'desperate strikers'.³⁹ They had been receiving diminishing prices that fluctuated daily from 1929 onwards and had found themselves with little or no control over the prices paid for their milk, especially if they had switched from selling milk for manufacturing to despatching it to the urban accommodation markets for liquid consumption.⁴⁰

Small farmers were, thus, guaranteed a market for their milk by the MMB but it is highly questionable whether those working at small-scale would have been receiving a price for the small amount they produced that was sufficient to allow them to survive, based as it was on an average price for all milk, and this is shown to have been the case by the significant numbers of small farmers who went out of business during the period 1931 to 1939. A number of the smaller farmers who made up the bulk of producer retailers were acknowledged in 1938 as having been affected quite badly.⁴¹ There was little scope for expanding production for these small farmers because production over and above levels agreed with Government at the beginning of the year simply resulted in the reduction of the price paid to the producers.⁴² Such dilution would not necessarily have deterred large-scale producers because they benefited from economies of scale so that a small price fall on a large increase of output would increase their profits; however, the knock-on effect of big producers behaving in this way would be to reduce the prices paid to all producers, including the small-scale ones that could afford price falls least. Lowered prices and increased

³⁹ *Home Farmer*, July 1935.

⁴⁰ Whetham, *Agrarian History*, pp.144-148.

⁴¹ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p.278.

⁴² Baker, p.136.

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contributions to the MMB would have had the kind of repercussions that are reflected in the falls in numbers of small farms in the dairy counties and elsewhere across England where farmers had turned to dairy, as detailed in Chapters Four and Five.⁴³ Farms of between one and 50 acres in the increasingly dairy county of Gloucestershire saw a fall of 6 percent in their numbers between 1919 and 1931 increase to one of over 15 percent between 1931 and 1939 whilst the West Riding's farms of one to 50 acres fell at 13.5 percent from 1931 to 1939 at the same time that farms of over 50 acres saw only a 0.5 percent reduction in their numbers;⁴⁴ that the responsibility for such falls and disparities lay at least partly with the work of the MMB are reiterated by the statement of the second Reorganization Commission for Milk of 1936 that 'all producers have not benefited equally', an understatement, as far as small farmers were concerned.⁴⁵

The producer retailers, whose status as generally small farmers was confirmed by one farmer at the MMB's 1939 annual general meeting (AGM) having to state that addressing them all as 'small men' meant that any larger producer retailers tended to be overlooked, were undoubtedly one sector of producers who felt that they had suffered from the setting up of the MMB.⁴⁶ The Reorganization Commission provided ammunition for their weapons of complaint:

⁴³ Chapters 4 and 5, above.

⁴⁴ Table 4.3; Table 4.4; Table 5.2; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Table 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1931, Vol.66*, Table 8 (pp.64-5); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Table 11 (pp.38-9).

⁴⁵ MAF, *Economic Series No.44*, p.150.

⁴⁶ *Home Farmer*, June 1939.

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While there must be considerable variation in the amount of advantage gained by individual producer retailers from the scheme, on the whole they must have gained less than other classes of producers.⁴⁷

Producer retailers felt particularly unhappy about the fact that they were expected to pay two levies, one to keep prices level across the country as a whole and another to equalise prices within the regional 'pools', an arrangement which would effectively increase the prices paid to large-scale producers of milk for manufacturing.⁴⁸ The domination of producer retailer ranks by farmers of small-scale holdings is demonstrated by the following statement from the journal publication *Milk Producer Retailer*, which simultaneously reflects the dissatisfaction felt with the workings of the MMB in respect of the levies: 'The levies payable by producer retailers often rose to an amount greatly in excess of the total rent payable for their farms.'⁴⁹ The journal carried the views of T.H. Morgan, Vice-President of the National Federation of Milk Producer Retailers (NFMPR), who was indignant about the role of the MMB in representing large-scale farmers:

To all appearances the MMB, whether we like it or not, has come to stay, and, no doubt, great credit is due to the Board for the successful way in which they have endeavoured to assist the Wholesale Producers in

⁴⁷ MAF, *Economic Series No. 44*, p.151.

⁴⁸ MAF, *Economic Series No. 38*, p.107.

⁴⁹ *Milk Producer Retailer*, 24 October 1935.

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marketing their milk; but surely we, as Producer Retailers, should not be asked to foot the bill for their experiments.⁵⁰

The problems of the producer retailers in their relationship with the MMB and the wholesale producers who were dominated by large-scale farmers had become so apparent by 1939 that the *Home Farmer*, the very journal of the MMB, itself, sought to acknowledge them:

There are many points where the activities of the Board on behalf of the wholesalers can prejudice the best interests of Producer Retailers. This point of view has now been accepted by the Milk Marketing Board.⁵¹

The journal revealed that serious misgivings about effects of the Board on producer retailers and small farmers had been aired at the MMB's AGM in 1939. Larger, 'wholesale' producers were entering the scheme and increasing production, with their numbers having risen from 84,400 in 1934-5 to 95,500 by 1939, increasing the amount and overall value of milk produced but, thereby, reducing prices paid to farmers.⁵² The difficulties of small farmers in acquiring the capital to undertake the necessary expansion or improvements in their businesses in order merely to maintain their level of income are clear. One smallholder, Mrs. Campbell, highlighted the 'tremendous amount of money' she would need in order to expand her business to allow her to sell milk from tuberculin tested cows which attracted a premium price under the MMB's

⁵⁰ *Milk Producer Retailer*, 31 October 1935.

⁵¹ *Home Farmer*, May 1939.

⁵² *Ibid.*

regulations.⁵³ Fletcher confirms the position voiced by Campbell, showing that to change to producing tuberculin tested and pasteurised milk, even after the Second World War, was too costly for small Lancashire farmers, especially producer retailers.⁵⁴ The *Milk Producer Retailer* argued vehemently against pasteurization and the prohibitive costs to small farmers of equipping their farms, justifying their opposition in articles on its dubious advantages and provenance, such as, 'Pasteurization Doesn't Work and Why', and suggesting the existence of a cheaper alternatives in, 'Exclusive Interview with Discoverer of New Antiseptic'.⁵⁵ Mr. D.T. Davies stated at the AGM that numbers of producer retailers had fallen by 50 percent since the inception of the MMB and that 'the Producer Retailers were being slowly but surely squeezed out of business'; Davies was echoed by Mr. Richardson of Blackpool who was paraphrased as saying, 'He thought the Producer Retailer was passing through the process of elimination owing to the unfair methods of the Board'.⁵⁶

Statistics show that, along with the West Riding, both Lancashire and the North Riding saw high rates of disappearance of small farms between 1931 and 1939 which were 8.5 and 12.5, respectively, which are similar to rates of decline in the 1920s when the difference in the length of the time periods under consideration is taken into account.⁵⁷ In contrast, rates of disappearance of large farms fell in both counties with the rate in the North Riding being less than 0.1 percent in the latter period. The two counties saw average increases in their

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Fletcher, 'Economic Development', pp.282-3.

⁵⁵ *Milk Producer Retailer*, 31 October 1935.

⁵⁶ *Home Farmer*, June 1939.

⁵⁷ Statistic refers to farms of 5 to 50 acres for Lancashire. Table 3.1; Table 5.4; Figure 6.1 and Ch.6 fn.21.

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dairy cattle of well below those for England as a whole, suggesting that the small farmers may have been exposed to less local competition than was felt in other counties across England. Counties that saw large increases in dairy herds in the interwar years and were becoming known as counties with substantial dairy interests during the 1920s⁵⁸ saw their small farms declining rapidly after 1931. Devon's small farms fell by 9 percent in numbers between 1931 and 1939, having increased by 4.5 between 1919 and 1931; in the same periods, Hampshire saw an increase in small farm failure rates from 8.5 percent to over 15, West Suffolk of 5 percent to 11 and Norfolk of less than 1 percent to 11, whilst Lincoln-Holland saw an increase of 2 percent in the earlier period become a fall of 13.5 between 1931 and 1939.⁵⁹

Dissatisfaction with the MMB was not confined to complaints at the AGM. The kind of factionalism existent within the dominant class recognised by Marx⁶⁰ is exemplified by the encouragement to farmers from Lord Beaverbrook, the proprietor of the *Daily Express* and advocate of imperial preference in trade, to vote in a poll to revoke the establishment of the MMB and to return the milk industry to unregulated trading conditions. Only 19 percent of producers voted to revoke the Milk Marketing Scheme as run by the MMB but it is clear that those

⁵⁸ Taylor, D., pp.61-2.

⁵⁹ Table 3.3; Table 5.7; Table 5.9; MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1919, Vol.54*, Table 10 (pp.38-9); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1931, Vol.66*, Table 8 (pp.64-5); MAF, *Agricultural Statistics, 1939, Vol.74*, Table 11 (pp.38-9).

⁶⁰ Marx, K., 'The German Ideology: Part 1', in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. by Tucker, R.C. (London: W.W. Norton, 1978), pp.146-200, (pp.163-186).

who rejected it were small-scale producers given that they only commanded control over 13.5 percent of total output.⁶¹

The result of the revocation poll is an indication of how the Marketing Act of 1931 allowed the MMB to be established as an organization that was not representative of the interests of small-scale farmers. The agricultural economist F.J. Prewett outlined the way in which such a marketing scheme as that run by the MMB could be brought into existence. Prewett noted that 'unless two thirds of the registered producers voting on the poll, controlling two thirds of the product of those voting, support it, the scheme fails. In any case, should less than half the producers (including those exempted) vote, the scheme again fails.'⁶² Thus, it can be seen that it was not necessary to gain even a majority of the support of the producers to implement a marketing scheme, merely to avoid substantial opposition, because only half of registered producers needed to actually participate in the poll to make it legitimate and only two thirds of that half – one third of all eligible producers - needed to vote in favour. On the other hand, it was dependent on support from large scale producers in order to make up the 'two-thirds of product' stipulation; a few large scale producers voting amongst the third voting in favour of it could see it implemented whilst a large number of small producers voting against it could still be undermined in their desire to implement it because they may not control sufficient of the production necessary to see it rejected. Large scale producers would have had to have seen some benefit to themselves in order to support a scheme and so, in effect,

⁶¹ *Home Farmer*, June 1935.

⁶² Prewett, F.J., 'The Government and Agricultural Marketing', *Journal of the Proceedings of the Agricultural Economics Society*, 22, (1932), 78-87, (pp.80-2).

they would be determining the future prices of the particular product in question, even for small producers, because they were the ones who would determine whether or not a scheme which would fix prices would come into existence. In the case of milk, small-scale producers who, because of market advantage due to location and specific local marketing conditions, might otherwise have benefited from higher prices were forced to accept the prices offered to them by the MMB. The structure of the MMB meant that it served further the interests of large-scale farmers since every extra ten cows in a herd conferred upon their owner an extra vote on all matters concerned with the setting-up, administration, amendment and possible revocation of the Scheme.⁶³

Holderness recognises that the MMB and other Marketing Boards were producer controlled institutions that were firmly under the control of the agricultural interest and that this, in principle, meant the NFU and the Country Landowners' Association (CLA). Furthermore, these associations were, in turn, both dominated by large-scale farmers and landowners: 'Neither association became demotic; the leaders of both were still customarily men of property, education and social weight, presiding over a more or less common stock of members'.⁶⁴ Cloke and Goodwin regard Gramsci's theory of a 'hegemonic bloc' of allied class forces as pertinent to changing rural politics⁶⁵ and it is appropriate to use it to describe a post First World War 'alliance' between large scale farmers and large landowners. Woods indicates that rural political power remained elitist

⁶³ Baker, pp.22-3.

⁶⁴ Holderness, 'Farmers', p.112.

⁶⁵ Cloke, P., and Goodwin, M., 'Conceptualizing Countryside Change: from Post-Fordism to Rural Structured Coherence', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 17 3, (1992), 321-36, (p.325).

in the interwar years, attainable only through the social capital accessible through membership of elite social and professional networks, such as those of farmers and landowners.⁶⁶ Brassley supports this, invoking Howkins, Thompson, Cannadine and Newby in support of his argument that after the First World War the reallocation of land from landlords to farmers incurred a coincidental and partial transferral of power and deference.⁶⁷ The importance of the kind of networks and associations referred to by Woods and Brassley is recognised by Bourdieu in his appraisal of the concept of social capital which he regards as social resources which stem from and can be employed in relation to social connections and the membership of certain social groups which, in this case, had certain elitist economic functions.⁶⁸ Bourdieu stresses the material basis of power but recognizes the importance and interdependence of different forms of capital - economic, social and cultural - to the elitist social and professional networks to which Woods refers.

The possession of significant social capital by large-scale farmers and landowners, premised upon the ownership of economic capital, resulted in their attaining positions of power, such as leadership and occupation of other positions of power in the NFU or CLA. Such power facilitated the creation of the policies of these associations that would work in the economic interests of the groups from which they, as leaders, were drawn: owners of capital for agricultural use and of land, otherwise referred to as large-scale farmers and

⁶⁶ Woods, p.464.

⁶⁷ Brassley, P., 'The Professionalisation of English Agriculture', *Rural History*, 16 2, (2005), 235-51, (pp.235-6).

⁶⁸ Bourdieu, P., 'What makes a Social Class? On the Theoretical and Practical Existence of Groups', *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 32 3, (1989), 1-17, (p.4).

landowners. Smith indicates that the beginnings of a 'policy community', wherein the representatives of social and economic pressure groups, such as the CLA and in this case, especially, the NFU are relied upon by Government to inform its policy, are discernible in the interwar years although it was not until after the Second World War that the agricultural policy community's existence became obvious.⁶⁹ By means of such a policy community, policy is implemented by Government but formulated in the interests of those with considerable economic and social capital who lead and influence the pressure groups.

The presidency of the MMB from its beginning with Thomas Baxter is an example of the conduits by which the policies of large-scale farmers became enshrined in Government policy; Baxter was an NFU stalwart, head of various of the Union's committees and a substantial mixed farmer of at least 300 acres in Cheshire; Baker has written that, 'the farmers of the day were not without friends in high places, and the plight of the industry directed the Government to seek remedial measures.'⁷⁰ Smaller farmers, such as the producer retailers, if they were not aware that their needs would not be met particularly well, could not blame it on the *Milk Producer Retailer*, the publication of the newly formed National Federation of Milk Producer Retailers (NFMPR), which spelled it out for them in October 1935: 'There was no organisation in existence to represent the producer retailers' cause, the attitude of the NFU being largely based on the interests of the wholesale producers.'⁷¹ Cox Lowe and Winter show that membership of the NFU increased in dairy areas after the introduction of the

⁶⁹ Smith, *Agricultural Support*, pp.37-86.

⁷⁰ Baker, pp.56-7, 67.

⁷¹ *Milk Producer Retailer*, 24 October 1935.

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MMB and, hence, once agreements with distributors had broken down, suggesting that the big dairy and ex-arable dairy farmers were influential in lobbying amongst farmers for the MMB.⁷² The smallest producer retailers would have suffered under the MMB through the imposition of their levy payments, as was made clear by Harold Pears, Chairman of the NFMPR:

The measure of independence which the PR has always hitherto felt has now been dangerously assailed. He is now no longer master of his own business. He has been bound up in a Milk Marketing Scheme, which is the law, and must be carried out.⁷³

The long-term decline of the producer retailer is testament to the paucity of influence that the NFMPR was able to wield in comparison to that of the large-scale farmers. Davies and Richardson had certainly been correct in the long-term at the 1939 AGM of the MMB in their dismal predictions for the future of the producer retailer:⁷⁴ having numbered up to 50,000 in the early days of the MMB, there were only 6,000 left in 1973.⁷⁵

The linking of prices to production levels by the MMB meant that the smallest farmers were unlikely ever to be able to earn a decent living from milk production because increases of production led to falls in prices. The result was that small farmers struggled and disappeared; this could be argued to be a form of concentration of the industry of milk production induced by the action of the State, but no reason exists to suggest that such concentration would not have

⁷² Cox et al., p.36.

⁷³ *The Milk Producer Retailer*, 24 October 1935.

⁷⁴ This Chapter, above.

⁷⁵ Baker, p.17.

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taken place had the milk market been left to carry on through open competition in 1933. Concentration and monopolistic tendencies are, if not inevitable certainly common in free market capitalism⁷⁶ and were identified in British agriculture in 1964.⁷⁷ Falls in numbers of small farmers that had been occurring before 1933, though disguised in some places by the creation of smallholdings, indicate that concentration was taking place much earlier. Astor and Rowntree argued in 1938 that such a process should be left to work in the case of the distribution of milk since this would bring down the price to the consumer and, therefore, were effectively condemning the many small farmers involved in producer retailing to annihilation, although they stopped short of suggesting that production by farmers should be completely unregulated.⁷⁸ The small producers seem to have been doomed whether they continued in free competition or under the auspices of a body funded by the State but under the control of large-scale producers. The words of T.H. Morgan, Vice-Chairman of the NFMPR in 1935, would seem to have been prophetic:

I picture in my mind a Federation 70,000 strong... to hold the balance of power between the Producers and the Distributors. For make no mistake about it, there are to-day strong and powerful organizations, political and otherwise, that are pledged to cripple the small man.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, pp.762-870.

⁷⁷ Britton and Ingersent, p.45.

⁷⁸ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, pp.294-302.

⁷⁹ *The Milk Producer Retailer*, 31 October 1935.

The Differential Effects of the Wheat Act on Large and Small Farms

The MMB has already been shown to have been dominated by the interests of large farmers, to the detriment of small milk producers. A similar situation occurred in the creation of legislation with regard to the interests of large-scale arable farmers which were reflected in the agricultural policies that developed in the 1930s. The Agriculture Act of 1937 extended subsidies to oats and barley, and, even earlier, the 1925 subsidies granted to sugar beet growers were a direct aid to arable farmers, sugar beet offering a complementary or alternative crop to wheat. The Wheat Act of 1932 was of particular benefit, offering guaranteed prices to farmers for wheat produced for sale with any difference between the guaranteed price and the lower market price being paid by Government, and it was enacted after the development of a characterization of large-scale arable farmers as being peculiarly badly affected by agricultural conditions since the First World War.⁸⁰ The development of this picture and the concurrent marginalization of small farmers will be examined here.

The marginalization of small farms and their occupants by issues relating to large arable farms in the interwar years becomes apparent in the ways in which agriculture and the countryside were represented by commentators in the popular press. In 1927, the *Daily Mail* ran a campaign focusing on the difficulties faced by farmers, the content of which demonstrates the popular understanding of farmers as substantial landowners suffering economic difficulties. The *Daily*

⁸⁰ Brown, *Agriculture*, p.126; Ibid., p.111; Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p.83; Whetham, *Agrarian History*, p.260; Brown, *Agriculture*, pp.113-4.

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Mail carried quotes from farmers, almost all of whom farmed large arable acreages, including farms of 1000 acres, 1100 acres, and 600 acres, and, significantly, included a quote from the landowner Sir Cuthbert Quilter, Bart., owner of 10,000 acres and farmer of 3,000; the smallest farm to be commented upon was still substantial, at 340 acres.⁸¹ The paper's correspondent added, on 10 June, 'I was told that demand for farms with a fairly large proportion of arable is very limited. Farms are being offered at auctions and there is scarcely a bid for them.'

The depression that followed the Wall Street Crash of 1929 is accepted as having adversely affected farmers by 1931,⁸² but it was represented as particularly serious for large-scale farmers in the Eastern counties where large arable farms were common. The *Lincolnshire, Boston and Spalding Free Press* ran an article in September 1931 entitled 'Protection for Agriculture' which represented the views of Mr. Frank Dennis, of Frampton Hall, Boston who fought the Holland Division in the 1929 by-election as an independent agricultural candidate. Dennis wanted to draw the attention of the Division's electors to the 'letter, addressed by Lord Beaverbrook to the "Daily Express", published on the 12th inst. addressed to farmers and labourers' which stated that,

Agriculture at last is within measurable distance of getting that justice which has been denied it in the past by all political parties [...] a full and complete programme. No half measures will do [...] the farmer has a lot of ground to make up to cover past losses [...] To dwell upon the success

⁸¹ *Daily Mail*, 1 June 1927; *Daily Mail*, 8 June 1927.

⁸² Chapter 1, above.

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of an individual or two gained in past years, or to pay any serious attention to the reports of big scale farming successfully coping with the hard times, as recently reported in the press – the deductions from which by the ordinary reader are entirely fallacious – as just grounds for an increase of wages is only throwing dust in the eyes of the workers. [...] there is no money in the industry: it is indeed on the verge of bankruptcy and many engaged in it are already bankrupt.⁸³

No mention is made of the small farms existing in Lincoln-Holland, the county in which the newspaper was published, possibly because the large numbers of smallholdings created in the county during the years after the First World War had disguised their problems. Larger farms had suffered falls in numbers between the First World War and 1927 in the arable region but some of this was due to the breakup of farms of over 150 acres to create smallholdings and small farms; West Suffolk, Norfolk, Lincoln-Holland and Hampshire all saw falls in numbers of their farms of over 300 acres during the period when smallholdings creation was at its zenith and these were all counties characterised by considerable numbers of smallholdings.⁸⁴ W.H. Blakeston, county secretary of the NFU in the East Riding, where farms averaged over 106 acres in size by 1939, had told the Daily Mail of 'the breaking up of large estates in East Yorkshire'⁸⁵ but, even so, falls in large farm numbers were by no means seen everywhere in the arable counties. West Suffolk saw its farms of 100 to 150 acres increase between 1919 and 1931 by 3.5 percent whilst farms of 20 to 50

⁸³ *The Lincolnshire, Boston and Spalding Free Press*, 22 September 1931.

⁸⁴ Chapter 5, above.

⁸⁵ *Daily Mail*, 1 June 1927.

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acres fell by 10 percent. Farms measuring more than 50 acres in size in Norfolk increased in number by 0.5 percent whilst the farms of 50 to 100 acres increased their numbers by 9.5 percent between 1919 and 1931.⁸⁶

The Wheat Act was the result of the reciprocal relationship that had developed between the influential landowners and farmers perpetuated in the interwar period to the benefit of the arable farming section of the agricultural community. Sales of landed estates after the First World War are often blamed upon the financial difficulties of the aristocracy and gentry but those who held on to land often went into farming on large acreages in their own right⁸⁷ and exercised considerable influence on Government agricultural policy in the interwar years on behalf of large-scale farmers, whose ranks they now shared and with whom they shared a direct economic interest. The Minister of Agriculture, Edward Wood, in 1925 made this relationship obvious in a letter he wrote to his Parliamentary Secretary, the landowner Viscount Bledisloe, in which he stated that he was a 'Conservative' who 'believes in the debt that the country owes to landowners'.⁸⁸

Guttsman's identification of the extent to which politicians from an aristocratic background still dominated the Cabinet in 1935 and held ministerial positions in ministries 'which pursued traditional policies', such as the Ministry of Agriculture, suggests that the agricultural interest acting through social capital operating within the hegemonic bloc of farmers and aristocratic landowners may

⁸⁶ Table 5.7; Figure 6.1 and Ch.6 fn.21.

⁸⁷ Thompson, F.M.L., 'English Landed Society IV', pp.15-22.

⁸⁸ Cooper, *Conservative Politics*, p.71.

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well have been considerable within Governments throughout the interwar years;⁸⁹ such a suggestion is supported by the opinion of the president of the Agricultural Economics Society in 1956 who believed that data from the Farm Management Survey had been used during the interwar years for 'political purposes'.⁹⁰ This suggestion is further strengthened by Guttman's assertion that those in power would tend to select people of similar class and education with whom to work,⁹¹ thereby, in this case, creating a Government body sympathetic to those with whom they shared social capital; this assertion is in concord with Bourdieu's research that suggests that the social class background and the cultural and conditioned behavioural factors that make up the habitus of the individual, that is, the totality of his or her social practices, are highly influential in the attainment of social position.⁹² Woods points out the landowning background of the incumbents of various important and influential local political offices in Somerset, including the lieutenancy, the chair of the county council, and the aldermanic bench, and discerns the emergence of a new political class in the countryside, one that included farmers.⁹³

Landowners still maintained much control over rural society following the War, merely adopting a less personal approach in the rural community itself, but they were now sharing this control as part of a broadened elite that included larger scale farmers who had assumed the role of the custodians of the

⁸⁹ Guttman, W. L., 'The Changing Social Structure of the British Political Elite, 1886-1935', *British Journal of Sociology*, 2 2, (1951), 122-34, (p.134).

⁹⁰ Brassley, P., Harvey, D., Loble, M. and Winter, M., 2013, 'Accounting for Agriculture: the Origins of the Farm Management Survey', *Agricultural History Review*, 61 1, (2013), 135-53, (p.142).

⁹¹ Guttman, p.134.

⁹² Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp.56-91.

⁹³ Woods, pp.464-5.

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countryside.⁹⁴ Haxey had detailed at length the influence of the landowning aristocracy in the House of Commons in 1939.⁹⁵ Moore articulates the position that the landowning and farming interest held in the Conservative Party that dominated British politics in the interwar period:

In the Conservative Party, the voices of the agrarian chieftains – the knights of the shires, the landowning peers, and the farmers – have always been regarded with the utmost respect and endowed with great authority in the conduct of affairs.⁹⁶

Newby et al. suggest that the power of large-scale arable farmers to see policy constructed in their favour is demonstrated by the disproportionate value of the interwar financial support to agriculture that they received, given that 80 percent was directed towards them.⁹⁷ The significance of the strength of the relationship between arable farmers, landowners and Government for any type of smaller scale farmer is demonstrated by the dwindling interest as the 1920s proceeded in the various campaigns for the establishment of smallholdings.⁹⁸ Even the traditionalists in the Conservative Party had, by 1926, abandoned interest in the formation of a new English small farm 'yeomanry' which has been shown to have been firmly on the political agenda immediately following the war.⁹⁹

The political influence of arable farming can also be seen in the promise made by the Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin that, were the Conservatives to be

⁹⁴ Ibid., p.464-6.

⁹⁵ Haxey, S., *Tory M.P.* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1939), pp.117-175.

⁹⁶ Moore, p.342.

⁹⁷ Newby et al., *Property*, p.120.

⁹⁸ Cooper, *Conservative Politics*, 64-93.

⁹⁹ Winter, p.89; Cooper, *Conservative Politics*, pp.71.

re-elected in 1923, arable farmers would receive an annual subsidy of £1 per acre. The lack of consideration of such a promise for the interests of small farmers is exemplified by the response of the journal, *The Dairy World and the British Dairy Farmer*, which would have been of interest to farmers of that 83 percent of holdings of less than 50 acres in size which Addison recognised several years later were still reliant to a considerable degree on dairying:¹⁰⁰ 'it has been argued that [...] the average dairy farmer does not stand to benefit by any subsidy in respect of arable land, for the reason that he has so little of it.'¹⁰¹

The influence of the large-scale arable farming interest in the formation of Government policy and in the formation of the general perception of agriculture as an arable undertaking should be obvious from examination of the *NFU Record* of March 1921 which carries an article headlined, 'The Wheat Prices Victory'. The journal quotes an extensive array of newspapers that had congratulated the NFU on its work in securing extended Government price guarantees for wheat and oats under the 1920 Agriculture Act, including *The Times*, *Birmingham Daily Post*, *Yorkshire Herald*, *East Anglian Daily Times*, *The Field*, *Staffordshire Advertiser*, *Hull Daily Mail*, *British Times and Mirror* and *Scarborough Post*.¹⁰² The same influence may not be immediately obvious when reference is made to the events of 1921 when Government price guarantees to farmers for wheat and oats were withdrawn at short notice rather than the four years promised. The so-called 'Great Betrayal' of agriculture was applicable only to arable farmers; however, it must be recognised that, at the time, the NFU had been relatively

¹⁰⁰ Lord Addison, p.243.

¹⁰¹ *Dairy World and the British Dairy Farmer*, 17 December 1923.

¹⁰² *NFU Record*, March 1921.

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happy to forego the guarantees in exchange for the abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board (AWB) which had fixed a minimum wage in agriculture.¹⁰³ The AWB was, of course, only of significance to farmers of acreages generally above 50 where it was necessary to employ agricultural labourers and especially to arable farmers who employed a much higher ratio of men to any given area than most other types of farming.¹⁰⁴ Further disadvantages to small farmers had existed in the regulations of the Corn Production Act and Agriculture Act, as the following extract from a letter to the agricultural publication, *Mark Lane Express* makes clear:

Again, take the corn production claims for 1921, what do we find? The Govt. refuses to pay for fractions of an acre; therefore, the small farmer with one-and-a-half acres of oats has one third of the claim struck out. What would happen if the Govt. blue pencilled one third of the amount due to the large farmer, say, with a claim for 90 acres of oats?¹⁰⁵

The notion of the repeal of Part One of the Corn Production Act as the 'Great Betrayal' of agriculture grew throughout the interwar years in agricultural circles, and this was in spite of its lack of significance to small-scale farmers and of the fact that arable farmers were compensated with £19,000,000 as a salve in the year following the withdrawal of support.¹⁰⁶ The compensation itself was regarded as tainted; H.M. Conacher, an agricultural economist working in the Civil Service commented in reply to a paper given by J.A. Venn in 1934 on State

¹⁰³ Cooper, *Conservative Politics*, p.65.

¹⁰⁴ Wynne, p.31.

¹⁰⁵ *Mark Lane Express*, 24 October 1921.

¹⁰⁶ Penning-Rowsell, pp.187, 193.

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support for agriculture, 'The amount paid on the repeal of the Corn Production Act is surely the result of the most inglorious breach of promise case ever settled out of court.' Venn agrees throughout this article, but observes pithily that 'from few of the beneficiaries themselves have audible comments been recorded', implying the existence of a certain resentment amongst agriculturalists that had been festering since 1921.¹⁰⁷ The restoration of the minimum wage in agriculture in 1924 was resented by arable farmers, according to one farmer, G.F. Ryder, replying to Venn's paper, but he also stated that he thought that the Sugar Beet (Subsidies) Act of 1925 had been implemented as compensation to arable farmers for the results of the wage legislation.¹⁰⁸

C.S. Orwin, the agricultural economist, former farmer and former land agent to the arable landowner, Christopher Turnor, wrote in 1930 of the 'tumbling down' of the countryside, of the farmers who 'may throw in their hands' and of the 'potential rural unemployment' that would, of course, only derive from and affect those farmers with the significant capital necessary to employ labour, notably arable farmers.¹⁰⁹ The dire circumstances in which arable farmers were represented as having found themselves by the 1930s is reflected in the legislation that was passed that was in their favour. The Wheat Act of 1932 was introduced to give guaranteed prices to farmers who sold wheat off the farm. The average size of farms in the arable counties has already been shown to have been large and it was these counties that were to benefit by far the most, as Astor and Rowntree recognised in 1938:

¹⁰⁷ Venn, 'The State', p.13.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p.23.

¹⁰⁹ Orwin, *Future of Farming*, p.44.

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Certain criticisms of the Act were raised during the first period of operation (1931-7), when it was pointed out that most of the benefit accrued to a restricted area in the eastern and southern parts of Britain where wheat growing is concentrated, an area which was already receiving most of the sugar-beet subsidy.¹¹⁰

Further advantages gained by the cereal farmers were that, not only were they represented on the Wheat Commission, set up to administer the Act, but also, because of the formation of the Commission, the subsidy they were paid was not exposed to annual scrutiny in the House of Commons.¹¹¹ Conacher's opinion of the Wheat Act was that it was an extension of the compensation to arable farmers as a result of the Repeal of the Corn Production Act and it is indicative of the influence upon the agricultural agenda of arable and, thus, on the whole, large-scale farmers: 'The Wheat Quota payments must also represent conscience money.'¹¹² Little doubt can exist of the overall attitude to large and small-scale farmers and the differential treatment they received within the political establishment once consideration is made of the following extract from the Minority Report of the Royal Commission on Agriculture which had recommended in 1919 the extension of the price guarantees to cereal farmers:

The corn grower is to be protected, but the producer of meat is to take his chance in the open market. The large farmer deriving his income mainly from cereals will have a claim on the Treasury should the market

¹¹⁰ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p.85 [brackets in original].

¹¹¹ Murray, p.33.

¹¹² Venn, 'The State', pp.21-2.

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price fall below the level of the guaranteed price. The small farmer, making his living by the production of butter, eggs, cheese, bacon, etc., commodities that were in the past affected quite as much as corn by foreign competition, must overcome his fears and fight his own battle.¹¹³

The acreage under cereals had fallen from seven million to five million between 1913 and 1939 but the acreage under wheat increased between 1931 and 1939 by half-a-million, demonstrating the incentive that cereal farmers received from the Wheat Act.¹¹⁴ The relative effects of the conditions in agriculture and the effects of policies on farms of differing sizes from 1931 to 1939 can be seen in the *Agricultural Statistics*. Farms of one to 50 acres in England continued to decrease in numbers with a fall of at least 12.5 percent whilst farms of over 50 acres fell by less than 1.5 percent, as noted above.¹¹⁵ Norfolk saw falls of over 11 percent in farms of less than 50 acres and of larger farms of only 3 percent; farms of one to 20 acres disappeared at a rate of 14 percent.¹¹⁶ West Suffolk's farms of over 50 acres saw a 4 percent fall in number but a reversal of fortunes of farms of over 300 acres which had fallen by 9.5 percent between 1919 and 1931 but increased by over 2.5 percent between 1931 and 1939, whilst the under 50 acre category lost over 11 percent, including 14.5 percent of farms of one to 20 acres in size. The fall in numbers of farms of over 50 acres in Lincoln-Holland reduced from 6 percent to less than 0.5 percent with an opposite and more marked trend shown by one to 50 acre farms which

¹¹³ NA/MAF/53/51, *Royal Commission on Agriculture 1919*.

¹¹⁴ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, pp.73-4; Murray, p.33.

¹¹⁵ This chapter, above.

¹¹⁶ Table 3.3; Table 5.7.

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saw 2 percent increases turned to losses of 13.5.¹¹⁷ The eastern wheat-producing counties, which had been reported as suffering the worst of the agricultural depression in 1930, had seen the numbers of foreclosures by the banks on farmers fall from 48 in 1932 to 18 in 1934, according to documents from MAF which contain the following extract from a memorandum:

From the point of view of farm incomes the Wheat Act has probably been the chief measure of farm relief of recent years and it seems therefore that we may draw the inference from the above figures that the relief was provided under the Wheat Act in those parts of the country where the financial situation was most serious.¹¹⁸

The absence of benefits for small farmers from the Wheat Act is apparent from the opinions of the agricultural experts of the day. The report of the committee engaged to investigate the future settlement of discharged servicemen on smallholdings had concluded that, even by 1916, farms of up to 50 acres of the mixed arable and grassland type where cereals and roots were grown for cash and as feed for the farm's livestock were uncompetitive and 'do not provide a living', with the 'slavish copying' of large farm methods being unsustainable on such farms.¹¹⁹ Venn stated that corn was 'essentially the product of large farms' and that 'wheat is not a small farm crop'.¹²⁰ The agricultural economist, R. McG. Carslaw showed at the hearings of the

¹¹⁷ Table 3.1; Table 3.2; Table 3.3; Figure 6.1 and Ch.6 fn.21.

¹¹⁸ NA/MAF/38/15, *Special Credit Facilities for Farmers, Memorandum*.

¹¹⁹ NA/MAF/48/26.

¹²⁰ Venn, 1923, *Foundations*, p.302.

committee examining tithe rentcharge that he had calculated the differential effects of the guaranteed prices for large and small farmers:

I feel confident that with the removal of the Wheat Deficiency Payments the net income of the farmers would be reduced by quite possibly three-quarters. [...] the system of organisation is itself related to the size of the farm, and on the smaller farms wheat is a relatively less important commodity than it is on the larger farms.¹²¹

Note should be made, in relation to the interwar support to wheat commanding 80 percent of interwar Government aid to agriculture, of the paucity of the support going to those branches of farming common amongst small farmers. The value of the output of the wheat crop,¹²² produced substantially on large farms, was £10 million in 1938-9 whilst the output of milk and of the combination of livestock and wool, both of which were produced more prevalently in the pastoral region where small farms were common and average farm size was relatively small,¹²³ were £64.6 million and £68.8 million respectively.¹²⁴ Murray's figures on incomes show that the average net cash income in arable farming was £282 for 1936-7 which was considerably higher than those for grassland farming and mixed farming at £188 and £233, with any type of mixed farming involving significant arable production providing better incomes than those that didn't.¹²⁵ Statistics show that, of the counties examined here, it was those in the east with the biggest average farm sizes that saw the

¹²¹ Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge, *Minutes of Evidence*, p.610.

¹²² Newby et al., *Property*, p.120.

¹²³ Chapter 4, above.

¹²⁴ Whetham, *Agrarian History*, p.260.

¹²⁵ Murray, p.382.

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smallest falls in their arable acreages between 1919 and 1939 but it is also apparent that, concurrently, these counties also saw the largest increases in their dairy herds.¹²⁶ It would appear that not only were the areas with the larger farms receiving aid in the form of the Wheat Act, but that they were benefiting most from legislation enacted to help dairy farming. Murray shows that the best incomes were to be found where arable and mixed farming took place on alluvial soils and where corn growing and dairying took place together.¹²⁷

The value of the connections between the large-scale landowners and farmers and Government are seen nowhere more clearly than in the results of the Wheat Act except, perhaps, in the enacting of the legislation to finally exempt agricultural land fully from local taxes – local rates – in 1929. This was a benefit derived in the first instance by landowners including those farmers who owned their own land. The tenor of the debate in the House of Commons over the proposal to remove agricultural land from the charging of local rates suggests that, certainly, members of the Labour Party were strongly unconvinced of the likelihood of the benefits of derating reaching small-scale tenant farmers suggesting that the legislation was simply a gift of £2.5 million pounds every six months to landowners who were, in Ramsay MacDonald's words, 'in a tight spot'.¹²⁸ This was disputed by Colonel Sir George Courthorpe, the Conservative MP for Rye, although his impartiality must come into question because, on his own admission, he was speaking as a large owner occupying

¹²⁶ Chapter 5, above.

¹²⁷ Murray, p.382.

¹²⁸ NA/MAF/48/555.

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farmer.¹²⁹ Farmers occupying and farming their own land would have specifically been aided because they would, formerly, have been directly responsible for the payment of local rates. Sturmeay estimates that the two classes of farmers amongst whom owner-occupation was at its highest in 1927 were those farming over 300 acres and those on less than five so it is safe to say that there would have been greater benefit to the larger farmers since the land on which they were paying was much more extensive.¹³⁰ The most striking example of the influence of the agricultural community and its large-scale landowners and farmers that was clearly in operation in Parliament must come from the MP, Mr. George Albert Spencer, using the example of a Lincolnshire farmer during the debates on the Agricultural Rates Bill on 19 April, 1929:

I wish to support the action of the Government in the interests of the farmers of the country. I have just been helping an Independent candidate at Boston who is the owner or part owner of 8,000 acres of land. Anything that is given by this Bill will go to that man himself as farmer. Last year he lost £40,000, although his land is some of the best to be found in the country.

The Bill passed into law.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Ibid.; Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p.379; Lord Ernle, p.418.

¹³⁰ Sturmeay, 'Owner-Farming 1900 to 1950', p.291.

¹³¹ NA/MAF/48/555.

The Part Played by Agricultural Workers in Small Farm Decline

Bourdieu and Passeron use the theory of 'misrecognition' to describe the failure of agents to recognise existing social relations as relations of unequal power. Misrecognition leads not only to a failure to challenge inequality but effectively to the social and cultural legitimization of the existing unequal social relations and their reinforcement because the continuing acceptance of them makes it increasingly difficult to question their arbitrary existence and the nature of their origins.¹³² 'Misrecognition' would seem to be the precise term to describe the behaviour of the MP for Broxtowe, Mr. G.A. Spencer, in defending the privileged existence of a farmer and landowner of 8,000 acres whose capital fund was large enough that he could lose £40,000 in a single year. The use of the term seems appropriate because Mr. Spencer was an MP for the Labour Party, the party committed, at least nominally,¹³³ to nationalization of agricultural land. The understanding of the Labour Party as being a socialist party at the time is made clear by the Conservative Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Health, Sir Kingsley Wood, who referred to the, 'Socialist remedy for agriculture which, as I understand it, is nationalization', during the very same debate over the de-rating of agricultural land in 1929 in which Spencer defended large-scale landowning.¹³⁴

¹³² Bourdieu and Passeron, pp.4-5.

¹³³ Griffiths, *Labour*, pp.230-2; Manton, K., 'The Labour Party and the Land Question, 1919-51', *Historical Research*, 79 204, (2006), 247-69; Tichelar, M., 'The Labour Party and Land Reform in the Inter-War Period', *Rural History*, 13 1, (2002), 85-101.

¹³⁴ NA/MAF/48/555.

The quote from Spencer might be thought to benefit from being contextualised, because he goes on to say that the reason he is defending landowning farmers is that they provide employment for agricultural labourers; however, this serves simply to demonstrate how deeply Spencer was suffering the effects of misrecognition because Spencer has singularly failed to recognise that any progress towards social and economic equality achieved through nationalization could not be made by encouraging private capital to dominate any industry. Gramsci's theory of the 'historic bloc' suggests that a relationship exists between the ideological superstructure and the economic base of any social formation¹³⁵ and this in turn informs a 'hegemonic bloc' of allied class forces within that social formation, a relationship that Cloke and Goodwin have identified as existing between farmers and landowners in the rural politics of England in the interwar years.¹³⁶ The most important aspect of the economic base for the ruling rural hegemonic bloc was the derivation of profit from the labour power of rural working class labourers and, whilst Mr. Spencer may not have recognised this, farmers who employed labour certainly seem to have done so.

Rural labour relations may not appear to have much pertinence to the economic existence of small farmers who did not employ regular labour but this is not correct. Labour relations were made central to the setting of the agricultural agenda in the interwar years by the hegemonic bloc of large scale farmers and landowners. The social and economic positions of these groups

¹³⁵ Gramsci, p.137.

¹³⁶ Cloke and Goodwin, p.325.

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derived from profit made ultimately as a result of the paid labour of employees and the labour of family members. Employing farmers and landowners benefited directly from labour, whilst landowners benefited from rents paid by tenants who either employed labour, often alongside their families where farms were small to medium size, or, in the case of small-scale tenant farmers, exploited family labour only.¹³⁷

Differing types of cultivation required varying amounts of labour, including on small farms, but a generalization must suffice, here. The categorization of farms of less than 50 acres in size as 'small' was one that was used in the limited attention that had been paid to the small farm sector by contemporary interwar agricultural economists who generally considered 50 as the largest acreage that could be farmed by the farmer and their family without the use of regular hired labour;¹³⁸ Venn demonstrates this in his 1933 statement, '50 acres forms roughly the dividing line between the holdings farmed by those who use their hands and those who use their brains.'¹³⁹

A representation was created in which landowners and large-scale farmers demonstrated that State imposed wage regulation and the demands of labourers, whether organised in trade unions or not, were undermining their ability to survive and that, if wage regulation were to remain in place, they, too, would need State support. A continual rhetoric that undermined the position of agricultural employees was created and is illustrated, below, and one of its

¹³⁷ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p.360.

¹³⁸ Chapter 3, above.

¹³⁹ This statement by Venn was 1st published in 1923 in, Venn, J.A., 1923, *Foundations of Agricultural Economics*, CUP, Cambridge. Venn, 1933, *Foundations (together with) Economic History*, p.112.

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results was the absence from the agricultural discourse of issues of genuine importance to the small-scale farmers for whom the actual, or direct, employment of regular paid labour was unimportant.

Howkins has demonstrated that the intensification of capitalist relations of production in English agriculture in the 1920s as a result of increased competition from imports of some products from overseas, notably wheat, meant that conflict on the farm was, if not inevitable, more than highly likely; conflict is structural, as Howkins recognises,¹⁴⁰ because, as Marx repeatedly asserts, capitalists seek by necessity to increase the value of their capital, and, since the direct source of such increase is labour power, the intuitive way of maintaining profit as prices fall is to make workers more productive, that is, to produce the same number or more of commodities as previously whilst expending less capital on labour.¹⁴¹ Farmers were often to be found arguing that the opposite was occurring, however, and that labour was becoming less productive.

Farmers' dissatisfaction with a decline in the willingness of labourers to accede to exploitation was articulated in their association of this decline with a corresponding decrease in workers' productivity, as articulated by Mr. R.W. Hobbs, a farmer of 2,200 acres in Oxfordshire, in his evidence to the Royal Commission on Agriculture in 1919. Hobbs, when asked by Committee member and NFU Vice President Mr. Herbert Padwick, 'Do you find that your men do as

¹⁴⁰ There is a cultural dimension – habitus – that has developed historically, interdependently with the possession of economic capital but one that, because of the demands of the free market, it is virtually impossible to escape as a capitalist; exploitation is structural. Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men*, p.15.

¹⁴¹ Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, pp.283-306.

much work per man per day as men in the former generation, shall I say a generation ago?' replied, simply, 'No, I do not think they do.'¹⁴² That such a decrease in productivity is a result of a moral defect in the workers related to their increasing avarice is implied in the exchange between Hobbs and Padwick that followed immediately afterwards; Padwick asked, suggestively, of Hobbs, 'You do not find that, when you put them at piece work, they only want to earn day wages and so get through their work quickly to leave off earlier?', the suggestion being that labourers deliberately worked less productively when paid for a full day than when offered the opportunity of the same pay for shorter working hours. Hobbs replied, 'No, we do not find that at all,'¹⁴³ which is somewhat ambiguous, but which, when considered in conjunction with another statement of his - 'I think most of us get our work done by piece-work at the present time' - suggests that piece work is more desirable for the farmer because, presumably, more efficient and therefore that he agreed with the sentiment that labourers' productivity was autonomously reduced under conditions of low reward.

These arguments about labour inefficiency are demonstrated to be spurious and ideologically motivated; agricultural economists A.W. Ashby and J.L. Davies, writing in 1929, demonstrated, amongst other things, that agricultural labour had become considerably more efficient, as measured by

¹⁴² F.M.L. Thompson notes that Haggard had said the 'flight from the land' left only 'dullards, the vicious and wastrels' on the land; 'Nevertheless', states Thompson, 'this collection of ageing cretins and village idiots must have performed wonders on the land. Fewer of them produced more than their younger, sturdier and more numerous forbears of the 1870s', as indicated by levels of 'British gross agricultural product' calculated by 'econometricians'. Thompson, F.M.L., 'Anatomy', p.219.

¹⁴³ NA/MAF/53/51.

indexes of physical volume of output per worker, thereby undermining farmers' contrary opinions.¹⁴⁴ In another article in the same issue, Ashby showed labour to be 54 percent more efficient in 1928 than in 1871.¹⁴⁵ The assertion of increasing labour efficiency made by Ashby and Davies was repeated in the same journal by Carslaw in 1935.¹⁴⁶

Alongside members of Government committees and their selected witnesses existed other ideological intermediaries who, through what Bourdieu would term an 'orchestration of categories of perception of the social world' into 'divisions of the established order',¹⁴⁷ defended the farmers' interests and ratified their position of domination in the established order. Such intermediaries are typified by John Hetherton who, as a farmer and editor of the Yorkshire based monthly newspaper *The Farmer's Advocate*, pursued a relentlessly negative line towards any influence upon the politics and operations of agriculture other than that of farmers. The newspaper, in a manner corresponding to that of Hobbs, above, attempted to convince readers that a traditional reciprocal goodwill that had existed in the industry was being undermined by factors upon which farmers and the history of the social relations of production in the industry had no bearing, to which the following extract attests:

I may say that up till now no industry has worked so harmoniously as
Agriculture - masters and men have worked on the 'give and take'

¹⁴⁴ Ashby and Davies, 'Farming Efficiency', pp.100-8.

¹⁴⁵ Ashby, 'Some Human and Social Factors', pp.92-3.

¹⁴⁶ R. McG. Carslaw, quoted in, Bridges, 'Scientific Progress', p.68.

¹⁴⁷ Bourdieu, quoted in, Wacquant, L.J.D., 'Toward a Social Praxeology: the Structure and Logic of Bourdieu's Sociology', in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, ed. by Bourdieu, P., and Wacquant, L.J.D. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008; 1st published 1992), pp.1-59, (p.13).

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principle and there has consequently been good feeling on both sides.

The professional agitator is destroying the brotherliness which has hitherto existed and the consequences will be disastrous.¹⁴⁸

Alongside the 'professional agitator', the term being applied to trade unionists, Hetherton identified the AWB, which had been established under the Corn Production Act of 1917, as a source of unrest in agriculture. The cloud of wages had long loomed large over the industry but by 1918 minimum wages were being set and conditions regulated through the AWB which was, consequently, attacked by Hetherton and *The Farmers' Advocate*. One of the issues subjected to sustained criticism in *The Farmers' Advocate* was the AWB's insistence in its publication *The Wages Board Gazette* upon the payment of over-time to workers for hours spent at work over and above those agreed by contract:¹⁴⁹

The *Wages Board Gazette* [...] tells us that working over-time is necessary owing to the vagaries of our weather but it does not explain that under-time is the result of the same cause. [...] Farmers, by paying their men when they can't work owing to the weather are really paying in advance for over-time! The labourers will know that when they work over they are only making up for time previously lost.¹⁵⁰

There is, thus, in this extract, evidence amongst those who claim to represent farmers, if not amongst farmers themselves, of a clear expectation of

¹⁴⁸ *The Farmers' Advocate*, August 1918.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ *The Farmers' Advocate*, November 1918.

a continued submission by labour to the will of farmers that could be expected to extend beyond the hours of which the workers are actually selling their labour power to their employers. Farmers, as this extract attests, expected labourers to compensate them with their free time for the effects of a risk, the weather, which farmers, as entrepreneurs, could be expected to have factored into their calculations of the margin of profit to be made from their investments and over which the workers did not have, nor would expect to have, any control. In this regard, agricultural labourers were, evidently, to regard their own existential concerns as subordinate to those of their employers which were to be expressed in the returns on the capital they invested in farming. Farmers, apparently, desired labourers be available to work at any time at which they were required without any compensation, material or spiritual, for the time they were expected to spend waiting to work, and that they be available during poor weather in the expectation of beginning work when the weather improved. The notion of 'being paid in advance' is, thus, disingenuous; labourers were expected to be under the control of the farmer even during hours of poor weather for which they were unable to perform actual physical labour, thus expending time for which they could expect to be paid, as well as, later, expending actual labour under the control of the farmer in time at work whilst only being paid once for the two periods under employer control. Paying labour only once for two periods of time that it spent, effectively, in the workplace, would be an extension of the working week and would represent a cut in the price of labour¹⁵¹ against the arbitrary imposition of which the AWB had been created to protect agricultural workers.

¹⁵¹ Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, pp.683-691.

Domination also extended to the employment of a degree of psychological manipulation to be seen in the quoted extracts from *The Farmers' Advocate* on the issue of overtime payments. An appeal is made to the workers' sense of self-worth in the first extract where it is made implicit in the use of the phrase, 'labourers will know', that those labourers with intelligence will see that a symbiosis exists of their interests with those of their employers and will, thus, work overtime for free; such a symbiosis is, in economic reality, illusory in the long term and shallow in the short, since prices are determined by markets and employers would only continue to employ labour at a living wage as long as it was profitable to do so.¹⁵² Such manipulation is further evident in an article from September 1918 which states, 'Farmers [...] and their men have been accustomed to "give and take" – the good ploughman has not hesitated to sit up night after night with his in-foal mares without thinking of "overtime".'¹⁵³ This extract demonstrates how the pride of the skilled workers in their craft can be exploited, the implication being that a skilled and worthy worker, exemplified by the ploughman, who is 'good' and, as a condition of this goodness, stays up at night to look after animals, gains metaphysical reward from the successful execution of a skilled task. The suggestion manifest in this extract is that material reward for some forms of skilled labour in certain circumstances is unnecessary and, possibly, even undesirable. Material reward is unnecessary because the possession of the skill itself is reward enough; this is an appeal to

¹⁵² Begg, D., Fischer, S., and Dornbusch, R., *Economics* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1984), pp.174-180.

¹⁵³ *The Farmers' Advocate*, September 1918.

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traditional social values inherent in any declining petit bourgeois,¹⁵⁴ such as the skilled labourer whose work relied on principles of craftsmanship. These traditional values, however, were the embodiment of a rural social hierarchy which was becoming increasingly redundant as it was replaced by the direct sale of labour consistent with the social relations of production of capitalism.¹⁵⁵

There is much historical evidence to undermine the presumption on the part of the writer that labourers had been accustomed in agriculture during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to benefiting substantially from a system that might be represented by farmers and their spokesmen as one of 'give and take', as quoted from the August 1918 *Farmers' Advocate*, above. This lop-sided interpretation of 'give and take' which appears to work predominantly in the favour of employer-farmers is once again evident in another representation of farmers' expectations as to the working of overtime by labourers in compensation for work interrupted by bad weather, as expressed in *The Farmers' Advocate*: 'As farmers pay for all those wasted days they expect their men to make up the time thus lost by working overtime, when required, without pay.'¹⁵⁶ This last extract and previous ones quoted suggest that working without pay as a result of weather interruptions was a commonly imposed practice by farmers upon labourers, at least until the creation of the AWB, as reference to F.E. Green's 1920 text confirms.¹⁵⁷ Presumably, labourers, already

¹⁵⁴ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p.350.

¹⁵⁵ Howkins, A., *Reshaping Rural England: a Social History 1850-1925* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), pp.276-281.

¹⁵⁶ *The Farmers' Advocate*, January 1919.

¹⁵⁷ Green, F.E., *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer, 1870-1920* (London: P.S. King and Son Ltd., 1920), p.116.

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on low wages in the early twentieth century¹⁵⁸ and refusing to make up lost time with unpaid work, would have been putting their jobs in jeopardy or, at least, their incomes. Even a small reduction in income would have had serious ramifications for agricultural workers and their families, given that over the period from 1879 to 1914, agricultural wages were, on average, only half those of many other industrial occupations.¹⁵⁹

Newby estimates that a horseman would work about 70 hours per week and a shepherd almost unlimited hours at certain times of the year before the First World War. 'Day-men', hired by the day and thus always unsure about periods of employment and, thus, income levels, were expected to be almost permanently at the farmer's behest,¹⁶⁰ especially since, as argued above, they were expected to be available to work whenever the weather was suitable. The regularization and mechanization of agricultural work that had been increasing into the twentieth century at least resulted in a decrease in day work on farms after the First World War, as farmers sought to solve labour shortage problems by increasing the numbers of workers paid by the week, problems that, incidentally, they themselves had helped create through the low wages they paid and the consequent exodus of the rural population.¹⁶¹

It is clear, however, that farmers still expected to be able to demand long hours from their workers after the War, just as they had before the 1917 introduction of the AWB; for example, Mr. R. Colton Fox, a substantial farmer

¹⁵⁸ Armstrong, *Farmworkers*, pp.137 -139.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p.138.

¹⁶⁰ Newby, *Deferential*, pp.29-32.

¹⁶¹ Viscount Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, pp.211-12.

who had been asked by the Yorkshire Agricultural Clubs to represent them at the 1919 Royal Commission on Agriculture, stated the opinion in his written evidence that, 'The proposal to abolish the "customary" hours for horsemen is absolutely unworkable.'¹⁶² The 70 hour horsemen's week contrasted unfavourably with other labourers' working hours, but even these other labourers were expected to devote 60 hours per week to the farmer, inclusive of meal breaks, and, in the apparently customary manner, to compromise their spare time and, thus, their potential additional earning capacity by compensating with unpaid labour for the farmers' failure to factor in the weather to his business calculations, as Colton-Fox confirms:

Previous to the existence of the Wages Board, our men labourers worked from 7a.m to 5 p.m. six days a week, resulting in a 54 hours week; considering the time spent going to and from their work, and also the many days lost through wet weather, this was not excessive. In the winter of 1914 horses were four weeks idle at a stretch, and the time lost had to be made up.¹⁶³

Newby illustrates how deeply felt were the antagonisms between agricultural labourers and employers during the interwar years with a quote from one labourer who refers to the period as one of "'hate all round".¹⁶⁴ Farmers sought to exercise control over the social and economic situation of workers even where they were not employed. *The Journal of the Central and Associated*

¹⁶² NA/MAF/53/51.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Newby, *Deferential*, p.236.

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Chambers of Agriculture and the Agricultural Record in 1929 carried minutes of a debate in the organization over proposals to extend unemployment insurance to agricultural workers which was seen by several members as highly undesirable, mostly for reasons concerned with the removal of control over the workers by farmers and the rights of the latter to speak on behalf of the former. Mr. Tom Thomson said, 'It was desirable to avoid, as far as possible, bringing the agricultural labourer into the political arena' and continued, 'The casual employee was, to a large extent, insured today. When he had finished pulling beets he found a job on the roads or stood on the street corner.' Sir Henry Fairfax Lucy 'strongly opposed the inclusion of agricultural workers in unemployment insurance, believing that it would not be in the interest of the men':¹⁶⁵

Mr Swaffield said that he had explained to farm labourers in Northamptonshire what would happen if they came under the scheme, and he was sure that if the question was put to the vote of the agricultural labourers in his district not one would vote in favour of the scheme.¹⁶⁶

No details are given of the actual explanation that Swaffield gave to the farm labourers.

The issue that caused most ire amongst farmers was the payment of wages and, particularly, of minimum wage rates imposed by law. The abolition

¹⁶⁵ *The Journal of the Central and Associated Chambers of Agriculture and the Agricultural Record*, November 1929.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

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of the minimum wage, set by the AWB, in 1921 had been welcomed by the NFU in Lincoln-Holland who had 'naturally a very strong desire that farmers should have freedom in making contracts with their men.'¹⁶⁷ The agricultural economist, John Orr, who wrote, 'I have an instinctive, unexamined and probably unreasonable prejudice against the minimum wage', quoted one farmer who told him that his neighbour, on abolition, 'put his men down to 23 shillings and trusted in his ability to drive them to get the work out of them.'¹⁶⁸ The Parliamentary Bill to reinstate the AWB in 1924 came under prolonged attack in the *NFU Record* where it remained on the front page from May to September and was blamed for the unemployment it would cause because farmers, unwillingly, would have to 'make things better for themselves' by laying off men.¹⁶⁹ 'A more mischievous measure it would be impossible to conceive' and 'an unworkable scheme' were verdicts on the proposed wages board whilst it was considered that it was being designed to 'harass the lives of unfortunate agricultural employers'.¹⁷⁰ Walter R. Smith, the former president of NALRWU, demonstrates the attitude of farmers to labour when responding to Minister of Agriculture, Sir Arthur Boscawen, who had criticised the coercive measures of the AWB as part of a justification for abolishing the original AWB in 1921:

The Right Honourable Gentleman went on to criticise quite severely the work of the Wages Board. He spoke of its coercive measures. This is not the fault of the Wages Board. If coercion has had to be adopted, what is

¹⁶⁷ *Mark Lane Express Agricultural Journal and Live Stock Record*, 11 July 1921.

¹⁶⁸ Orr, pp.3, 10.

¹⁶⁹ *NFU Record*, May 1924.

¹⁷⁰ *NFU Record*, June 1924.

the reasonable explanation? It is that employers of labour have refused to carry out the Board's decisions and that they have withheld wages from their work people that were legally theirs. It is right that a man who breaks the law should have proceedings taken against him, more especially when his action is responsible for the withholding of wages from some of the poorest paid of workers. [...] I have a cutting from the Western Daily Press of the 20th of last month in which a farmer, in speaking of the decision to abolish the Wages Board, states that it means that farmers will get cheaper labour and will be able to make their men work longer hours. [...] Only as recently as Saturday I came across a case where a farmer had reduced the wages of his workmen by 16 shillings a week. How is it possible to have conciliation committees formed with any degree of confidence with people who pretend that they do not know that an Act has been passed or an order has been issued, and have to be summoned to make them obey it.¹⁷¹

Wage levels were referred to, often, by differing bodies representing factions within the rural hegemonic bloc in the later 1920s and 1930s as being responsible for difficulties in agriculture. The responsibility of workers' wages for 'the depression in agriculture' was made clear by the 'Parliamentary Secretary of the Minister of Agriculture' in January 1928, the *NFU Record* told its readers.¹⁷² The assignment to wages of the responsibility for agricultural difficulties continued at the Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge in 1934 where Mr. J.O.

¹⁷¹ NA/MAF/48/234.

¹⁷² *NFU Record*, January 1928.

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Steed of the Central Chamber of Agriculture (CCA) stated that the problems of owner-occupying farmers' existed because 'wages have not yielded to prices'. The NFU representatives stated that wages had been 'mounting up' since the Agricultural Wages Act of 1924 whilst the statement by the CLA said that the 'stabilization' of wages in 1924 and of tithe payments 'was bound sooner or later to bring about the serious difficulties with which tithe-owners and tithe-payers are faced today'. 'One third of the cost of production is attributable to wages' was the view of the Auctioneers' and Estate Agents' Institute of the United Kingdom. Mr. Coleman of the Wessex Agricultural Defence Association considered 'the rise in wages' a considerable contribution to the hardship of farmers whilst the Association's R.F Watkins stated, 'The subsidizing of wages brought about by the Agricultural Wages Act of 1924 has aggravated the position'.¹⁷³ Farmers still appeared to regard it as their right to voice the opinions of their employees in 1934 despite having diametrically opposed objectives to them regarding the distribution of farm revenues; C.F. Ryder stated, in reply to Venn's paper to the AES, that, 'The high wage bill is a very large addition to the charges of the arable farmer,' going on to say, 'It is not liked by the men themselves.'¹⁷⁴

One contrasting view of the level of wages came from Mr. George Middleton, governor of the tithe-holders' body, the Queen Anne's Bounty:

It is true the labour costs have gone up very largely. [...] On the other hand, the number of people employed has been less and where

¹⁷³ Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge, *Minutes of Evidence*, p.430.

¹⁷⁴ Venn, 'The State', p.23.

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mechanized apparatus is employed the general overhead costs are even as low as they used to be before the War.¹⁷⁵

The views of the tithe-holders had no effect on the NFU whose publication the *NFU Record* was unequivocal in 1936 in its opinion of the effects of wages legislation and its results:

As far as England and Wales are concerned, employers of agricultural labour have since 1924 been subject to the operation of the Agricultural Wages Act. [...] It is fair to say that the assistance which has been accorded to the industry by successive Governments has been absorbed in maintaining these uneconomic wage rates.¹⁷⁶

An extract from *The Land Worker* suggests that the agricultural economists, Ashby and Smith, were probably as unaware in 1938 that the workers' wages and productivity levels were uneconomic, as farmers claimed, as Ashby had been, with Davies, in 1929 and Carslaw had been in 1935:¹⁷⁷

A study by Prof Ashby and Mr. J.H. Smith of recent wage changes on farms reveals the fact that the farmer's total wage bill, in spite of increases in wage rates, is now smaller than it used to be, because of fewer workers and their greater output per man.¹⁷⁸

Griffiths has maintained recently that a novel, more sympathetic public understanding of farmers emerged during and after the Second World War that

¹⁷⁵ Royal Commission on Tithe Rentcharge, *Minutes of Evidence*, p.611.

¹⁷⁶ *NFU Record*, June 1936.

¹⁷⁷ This chapter, above.

¹⁷⁸ *Land Worker*, September 1938.

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resulted from representations of farmers as socially responsible and less individualistic.¹⁷⁹ Griffiths makes little reference to relations with workers and it is not surprising that this image of farmers seems, therefore, to be one that arose in isolation from the approach of large-scale farmers to their labour force in the interwar period. Those farmers, whose prosperity was a function of the treatment of their workforce insofar as such treatment had played a part in the creation of agricultural subsidy, had spent the years between the two Wars denying any credit to that workforce and blaming it for their travails; however, as a group of business owners, large-scale farmers and farming landowners seemed to be enduring the conditions reasonably well, at least if the numbers of their farms disappearing from the statistics after 1931 is any measure. Certainly, if the material condition of agricultural labourers had changed for the better as a result of high wages, the famous paper of the medical profession, *The Lancet*, was not aware of it; according to *The Land Worker* in 1938, *The Lancet* claimed that, 'No need is more pressing in England today than to raise the status of the farm worker.'¹⁸⁰

Gowers and Hatton suggest that wheat deficiency payments under the Wheat Act raised farmers' incomes more than minimum wage regulation raised farm costs whilst the addition to farm incomes from the wheat deficiency payments increased, relative to wage payments, as farm size increased.¹⁸¹ This suggests that the continual campaign to maintain that the wages of agricultural

¹⁷⁹ Griffiths, 'Heroes', pp.209-28.

¹⁸⁰ *The Land Worker*, July 1938.

¹⁸¹ Gowers, R., and Hatton, T.J., 'The Origins and Early Impact of the Minimum Wage in Agriculture', *Economic History Review*, 50 1, (1997), 82-103, (pp.99-100).

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workers were crippling high had been successful insofar as it had eventually influenced policy in cereal farmers' favour.

Agricultural labourers and their families were one of the most disadvantaged sections of English society during the interwar period.¹⁸² Vociferous criticism of the payment of adequate wages and of official interference with the setting of wage rates has been shown to have been raised from sectors of an agricultural business community that ultimately derived its social and economic position from the product of labour on the land. The effect of this was to obscure in general the increasingly acute problems of another section of the farming community, the small farmers and their families, but occasionally they would be recognised; one occasion was the response of the agricultural economist, D.K. Elmhirst, to a paper given by H.M. Conacher:

I think there are quite a number of family farms in England which, under the impact of the world price system and of increased efficiency in the farming industry, are incapable of holding their own even if the depression lifts. All kind of uneconomic units, including smallholdings and small farms, are being driven to the wall to-day.¹⁸³

Elmhirst continued with an observation even more relevant to a study seeking to highlight the marginalization of small-scale farmers:

Although we have a way of saying that in times of depression "These are the farms where men can easily tighten their belts" – we are really saying

¹⁸² Armstrong, *Farmworkers*, p.201.

¹⁸³ Conacher, H.M., 'The Relations of Land Tenure and Agriculture', *Journal of the Proceedings of the Agricultural Economics Society*, 4 3, (1936), 167-201, (p.191).

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“We don’t mind their starving or being sweated so long as they do it quietly and out of sight” [sic].¹⁸⁴

The decline in numbers of small farms in the interwar period seems to have occurred ‘out of sight’ because it was hidden behind the issues, such as payment of wages, which were of significance only to farmers on larger acreages.

Conclusion

Venn said in 1934 that farmers were ‘looking to the future with less apprehension’, going on to say that the prosperity that farmers will enjoy will have been ‘fostered and expedited by preferential treatment of an all-embracing character’. The contention of this chapter has been that the preferential treatment had been somewhat less equally distributed amongst farmers than Venn might have assumed.¹⁸⁵

Large farms have been shown to have retained their numbers much more successfully in England in the 1930s than small farms. This success has been shown to be consistent with the enactment of legislation giving financial support to agriculture and it has been argued that farmers and landowners were able to employ their social and economic capital to influence the creation of that legislation in their own favour. Ashby commented in 1929 that, during periods of depression, ‘farmers who are financially strong [...] start to maintain their

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Venn, ‘The State’, p.23.

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share by getting it from other people';¹⁸⁶ in this case, they engineered a situation where they maintained their share through a disproportionately large share of the State's aid to the agricultural industry, effectively taking a share that might have gone to small farmers. The result was that the incomes of farmers rose in relation to those of workers between 1933 and 1938, according to Bellerby, who goes on to acknowledge State support, including to milk and wheat production, as a considerable influence upon the differential fortunes of farmers and workers but makes no reference to the incomes of non-employed farmers.¹⁸⁷ Note should be made of the extreme lack of attention that was paid to the disappearance of the considerable numbers of small farmers during the period in which the events depicted in this chapter were taking place. Even the issues of the producer retailers, who numbered up to 50,000 in the mid-1930s,¹⁸⁸ were only being addressed by the isolated voice of the journal specifically dedicated to them, *Milk Producer Retailer*.

A hypothetical accusation that the ignorance of the small farmer has been perpetuated by the emphasis of this chapter upon the issues concerning large-scale farmers would be, firstly, incorrect, due to the reference to statistics on small farms and, secondly, specious, because the aim has been to bring to attention the effects that the dominance of the agenda by those large farm issues had upon small farmers at the time, in order that future work might be better informed. The issue of the treatment of agricultural labour is, anyway, of relevance to the study of small farmers because it led to legislation that failed to

¹⁸⁶ Ashby, 'Some Human and Social Factors', pp.91-2.

¹⁸⁷ Bellerby, p.137.

¹⁸⁸ Baker, p.17.

help them but which has been assumed to have been of benefit to agriculture, as a whole. The interwar agricultural discourse was dominated by wage issues which were of little direct significance to small farmers but were made to appear to be of massive importance to large farmers, leading to the Wheat Act of 1932 from which small-scale farmers benefited little. Reference to the 1934 work of Harkness even suggests that the portrayal by farmers of their workers as the source of any financial problems that they might have been encountering and which influenced policy in favour of wheat subsidies in 1932 was even more mistaken – or disingenuous – than has been demonstrated, here; the output per worker had increased by 15 percent between 1924 and 1931 with a concurrent fall in the national agricultural wage bill in England from £54 million to £52.6 million.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Harkness, pp.34-5.

Conclusion

Farmers have, to some extent, been objectified in this study in the form of the farms that they operated but purely because the farms they operated offered the best available statistical representation of their existence; however, as a consequence, the conclusion to be drawn from this study can be best understood as having two interrelated parts: one economic, the other social. Firstly, the evidence has shown that the single economic factor of most influence to the chances of success or, at least, of survival of farms in the interwar period was the acreage of the farms in question which, realistically, was required to be of 50 acres or more; however, the social counterpart to this is not that large-scale farmers prospered whilst small farms declined but that they prospered at the expense of small-scale farmers because their economic power afforded them social and political influence to be wielded in their own favour whilst small farm requirements were ignored. It is the combination of the economic and the social factors that give the conclusion its significance. Such a conclusion has not been drawn before, even though a framework of rural power relations that included farmers as part of a rural 'hegemonic bloc' has been previously delineated; this earlier framework did not extend to recognising an objective division based on the differential possession of capital – in the form of land - within the umbrella group of farmers themselves.

The social element of the conclusion can be given much more exploration and detailed illustration than has been afforded in this work. The greater part of

Conclusion

this study has been an effort to provide an empirical web with which some evidence of the effects of the observed social historical circumstances has been interwoven. The search for further observable experiences and recorded examples of social behaviour that exist to ratify the theory and synthesise it with the empirical evidence should be undertaken in future research. Much remains to be said about the relationship between large-scale and small-scale farmers but it has been demonstrated here that the relative chances of the survival of farms of 50 acres and above and those below were dramatically unequal. The fundamental difference was in the presence of employees on the larger farms which facilitated economies of scale and thus the increase of profits for large-scale farmers that were simply impossible on small acreages; as Marx points out:

The battle of competition is fought by the cheapening of commodities. The cheapness of commodities depends, all other circumstances remaining the same, on the productivity of labour, and this depends in turn on the scale of production. Therefore, the larger capitals beat the smaller.¹

Bridges' evidence supports the argument that large-scale production on bigger farms and the large capital necessary to undertake it had benefits over small that derived from the employment of labour power. Bridges, in 1947, noted Ashby's calculations showing that output per man had increased by 80 to 90 percent over 70 years to 1942, stating drily, 'It is probably a fair statement to say that labour, power and machinery costs combined are higher on small farms

¹ Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, p.777.

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than on large farms of the same natural fertility.² Wynne showed the social income per 100 acres per 'man' to be much greater on arable farms of over 500 acres in 1944-5 and 1947-8, at £354, than the £302 on farms of 51 to 100 acres, demonstrating the increasing economies of scale as farm-size increased; it goes unsaid that, of course, the greater part of this income would return to the farmer as profit on that labour after wages had been paid, with the farmer receiving, in this case, £1,745 per annum on a 500 acre farm.³ In contrast, incomes on small milk and butter farms had been very poor in 1929 at £42 per person on a 35 acre milk farm and £33 on a similarly sized farm producing butter.⁴ Thus, the most significant factor, in general, in interwar English agriculture was the possession of capital in the form of land;⁵ its complement was, of course, capital in the form of money which was necessary to pay labour and to invest in more land and labour or labour-saving devices, money that had been, at some earlier point in time, accumulated from the sale of commodities⁶ derived from the labour on the land of paid workers.

The existence of economies of scale are, it must be said, recognised in mainstream economics but inequalities were not simply the result of the bourgeois 'natural laws' of political economy as understood by both the neoclassical economists in the interwar period as well as the Keynesians;⁷ however, nor were they simply the result of the monopoly tendencies recognised

² Bridges, A., 'Efficiency in Agriculture', *Journal of the Agricultural Economics Society*, 7 2, (1947), 126-44, (pp.126-8).

³ Wynne, pp.30-1.

⁴ Ashby, 'Some Human and Social Factors', p.92.

⁵ Newby et al., *Property*, p.39.

⁶ Bourdieu, 'Forms of Capital', p.241.

⁷ Sutcliffe, B., 'Keynesianism and the Stabilization of Capitalist Economies', in *Economics: an Anti-Text*, ed. by Green, F., and Nore, P. (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp.161-83, (pp.169-70).

Conclusion

by Marxists. Inequalities in agriculture were perpetuated and extended, at least in part, from Government policies that gave financial support to agriculture. Léon Walras had said in the nineteenth century, 'Pure economics is, in essence, the theory of the determination of prices under a hypothetical regime of perfectly free competition.'⁸ The situation prevailing in rural England during the interwar years has to be recognised as in no way resembling one in which the laws of 'pure economics' were at work. The most obvious subvention of pure economics was in the increasing volume of State aid given to farmers which, as Bellerby pointed out, was 'capable of substantially raising the farmer's incentive income, even during general depression.'⁹ The granting of State aid to agriculture, in particular in the form of the subsidies to wheat and the creation of the Milk Marketing Board, have been shown to have been of much greater benefit to large-scale farmers than to small.

The disparity in the structuring of State aid resulted from the existence of a rural hegemonic bloc whose most prominent members were landowners and large-scale farmers who were able to use their social capital – their positions in power and social networks and their understanding of this power and networks, conscious or otherwise – to influence policy. Small farmers, with rare exceptions, did not possess the economic capital necessary to allow them the time and leisure¹⁰ to generate such social capital and, thus, it can be seen that the possession, or not, of economic capital was hugely significant in determining the fortunes of interwar farmers. Small farmers possessed only the petty capital

⁸ Gill, p.413.

⁹ Bellerby, p.137.

¹⁰ Moore, p.165.

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of a business so small as to not be able to employ and make profit from labour and thus were, objectively, part of a different stratum or social 'class' from large-scale farmers. Small farmers were petit bourgeois, deriving income from their own labour and that of their families; large-scale farmers derived their income from the investment of capital and the payment of wages and, as with landowners who had taken to farming, constituted elements of the bourgeoisie, to varying extent.¹¹ The result of this division of class interests is clear in the disproportionately high failure rate of small farms in the interwar years and it is this realization, based on the statistics and narrative supplied in this work, above, that can inform future study of the interwar English countryside.

Very little has been written about the social relations of the countryside in the interwar years with only Newby, Howkins and Mansfield tackling the relations between landowners, farmers and labourers to any extent and, even then, either in reference to a much wider narrative or only up to 1930.¹² Griffiths has concentrated on the political activity of the organised labour movement, including where her research has related to farmers; this avoids the ways in which the dominant classes of the countryside came together in a new rural bourgeoisie after the First World War to dominate the economic life of the English countryside and, thus, to exercise the greatest influence in its social and cultural life. Cultural life would have been of little comfort to the small-scale farmers and their families who were being expelled from the land as a result of

¹¹ Poulantzas, p.174.

¹² Mansfield, *English Farmworkers*; Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men*; Newby, *Deferential*.

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the influence wielded by those in possession of the requisite economic and social capital.

Small farmers do not appear to have been actively and openly discriminated against; they were simply not recognised within the farming community as having distinct political requirements resulting from their particular economic circumstances. This lack of awareness extended to small farmers themselves but was not replicated in the wider rural or agricultural communities within which small farmers were romanticised in myths of race and nation, to the point of being artificially augmented through newly created smallholders. The study of competition amongst small farmers between the Wars, such as was created artificially by the creation of statutory smallholdings, is one area offering opportunities for deeper engagement; an economic dimension needs to be retained, one in which the advantages of large-scale business over small competitors are recognised. The increasing of numbers of smallholders after the First World War acted to the detriment of small farmers since it resulted in a further extension of competition at a time of growing exploitation of small farmers' markets by better capitalised large scale farmers. The limitations of the length of this thesis mean that, although the milk market has been shown to have been a case in point, the same was happening to other small farmers has not been shown. Market gardening and vegetable production are good examples of market opportunities being exploited in the 1930s by large farmers to the detriment of small farmers,¹³ as evidence from smallholders in the Vale of

¹³ Menzies-Kitchen, A.W., 'Land Settlement and Unemployment', *Journal of the Proceedings of the Agricultural Economics Society*, 4 2, (1936), 135-49, (p.139).

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Evesham in 1938 testifies, their responses to questioning on future prospects recording a dolorous outlook: 'Not good. Competition from farmers', 'Farmers make the small growers' position untenable', 'Very poor for the small grower, whose day is past', 'Not much better in view of severe competition from farmers', 'Not good if present prices and competition continue'.¹⁴ Such competition may not have caused the kind of resentment amongst small farmers that might lead to them questioning their kinship with other farmers, however; Ashby stressed in 1929 that competition was taken for granted amongst farmers and that, 'They believe that wealth is got rather than made (i.e. that wealth is got by struggling with people rather than with the forces of nature).'¹⁵

The study of small-scale farmers in their relations with other groups is problematic because evidence relating to them is very difficult to unearth, with the exception of official documents on Government and County Council smallholders; R.B. Jones of the *AES* wrote, in 1957, 'Little or nothing is known about the operators of holdings of various sizes to given changes in economic conditions.'¹⁶ The actual attitudes of small farmers seem to have escaped recording, possibly because it was necessary for them to actually work such long hours on the farm in order to survive that they could never develop any social capital through attaining political positions, let alone wield it. Brassley shows that large-scale 'professional' farmers have dominated the NFU whilst small-scale farmers did not possess the financial capital to allow them to take time off work

¹⁴ Dawe, C.V., 'An Economic Survey of Smallholdings in the Vale of Evesham', in *Smallholdings Studies: Reports of Surveys Undertaken by some Agricultural Economists*, ed. by Viscount Astor and Rowntree, B.S. (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd, 1938), pp.4-19, (pp.10-11).

¹⁵ Ashby, 'Some Human and Social Factors', p.91 [brackets in original].

¹⁶ Jones, R. B., 'Farm Classification', pp.201-24.

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to engage in politics nor to utilise professional services in order to improve their businesses. Similarly, as Street recognised between the Wars, they had neither the time nor money to acquire and benefit from agricultural education.¹⁷ Griffiths has, creditably, found one incidence of a small-scale farmer in the 1930s who expressed the belief that small farmers were suffering from being led by those on large acreages, but this is a lone voice.¹⁸

Research could be directed at the possibility that small farmers simply identified with all other farmers, tenants or otherwise, whose consciousness was dominated by the normative discourses of individualism and voluntarism which are the complementary 'philosophies' of *laissez-faire* liberalism and free market economics; such discourses were apparently popular amongst farmers in the interwar years, as demonstrated by the rhetoric of the *Mark Lane Express* on the natural rights of farmers and workers as 'free born Englishmen' to strike individual bargains over wages.¹⁹ Burchardt has highlighted Newby's identification of a single umbrella identity amongst farmers, despite the fact that family farmers have not benefited from the activities of the NFU and CLA over time, dominated as they are by large-scale farmers and landowners.²⁰ Thus, any benefits gained by farmers' representatives through the hegemonic bloc and policy community would be understood by small farmers to be available to all farmers, and the most effective individual would be the one that survived. The reality might have been that the only possible remedies for economic problems

¹⁷ Brassley, 'Professionalisation', pp.243-9.

¹⁸ Griffiths, *Labour*, p.285.

¹⁹ *Mark Lane Express*, 11 July 1921.

²⁰ Burchardt, 'Introduction: Farming and the Countryside', p.8.

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amongst small farmers, given the difficulties of generating investment capital for intensification or expansion, were much greater protection for the prices of their products in the marketplace or cooperation in production and marketing. The limits to agricultural support may well have been extended significantly under the Agriculture Act of 1947 but the 1946 Hill Farming Act,²¹ 1959 Small Farmer Scheme²² and the 1965 Agriculture Act gave tacit and open encouragement respectively to the demise of small farms,²³ as shown by subsequent falls in numbers.²⁴ The hostility of farmers to incentives to cooperate in the interwar period reflect a facet of their identity consistent with what has been said, here, but would endure some research.²⁵

One way of comprehending the, seemingly, self-defeating behaviour of the small farmer in acquiescing to leadership by the bourgeois dominant class, beyond the time constraints on autonomous political behaviour engendered by the struggle to survive, might be to contextualise it within wider interwar society. Petit bourgeois farmers were part of the middle class; this is a middle class understood in the universal, objective sense and not, as Gramsci makes clear, in the particularistic sense applied in Britain whereby the aristocracy and gentry are perceived to be an 'upper' class, rather than a feudal remnant, with petit-bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie lumped together as the 'middle class'.²⁶ The most perspicacious landowners became part of the ruling bourgeoisie from the last

²¹ Newby, *Country Life*, p.191.

²² Self and Storing, p.84.

²³ Whitby, p.83.

²⁴ Grigg, 'Farm Size', p.185.

²⁵ McKibbin, R., *Parties and People: England 1914-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp.35-6.

²⁶ Gramsci, p, 216.

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quarter of the nineteenth century through, either, selling land and reinvesting the liberated capital or taking to farming and forming part of the hegemonic bloc in the countryside with other capitalist farmers.²⁷ The middle class had a deep fear of - and snobbery towards - the working class which had no direct material basis,²⁸ unlike the relationship between employing farmers and their workers, and there is no reason to assume that this would not be shared by middle class farmers, especially given their immersion in a rural society that venerated hierarchy.

Perhaps, the reason for the ignorance of the existence of the small farmer derived from the fact that they were overshadowed numerically by the numbers of agricultural labourers and appeared insignificant when judged by the small acreage they occupied and capital they controlled. Such ignorance of small business would not appear to fit the modern rhetoric which stresses its importance in economic development. The 'individualism' and independence much prized by the small farmer in the interwar years²⁹ has remained one of the attractions of the small business³⁰ but the interwar experience of farmers should, perhaps, sound a cautionary historical note, as Ashby's statement from 1929 suggests:

Most small farmers and certain members of their families have no real 'refusal price' for their labour or capital, except the total family income

²⁷ Ibid., pp.128, 156; Perkin, p.254; Thompson, F.M.L., *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century*, pp.292-345.

²⁸ McKibbin, pp.2, 36.

²⁹ Ashby, 'Some Human and Social Factors', p.91.

³⁰ Delmar, F., and Witte, F.C., 'The Psychology of the Entrepreneur', in *Enterprise and Small Business*, 3rd edn., ed. by Carter, S., and Jones-Evans, D. (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2012), pp.152-75, (p.164).

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which will enable them to live at their accepted standards. [...] Small farmers will accept reductions of temporary standards, even some reductions in their established standards, as long as the other advantages of their occupation are not threatened.³¹

Ashby wrote this in 1929 and was perhaps not aware that the 'advantages' enjoyed by small farmers were under the kind of threat that their disappearance in large numbers demonstrates was a reality. Even when they did not fail, life was an unremitting struggle; the Smallholdings Commissioner, F.E.N. Rogers had said in 1916 that 'children work like slaves on smallholdings' whilst a MAF advisory committee had reported that smallholders had neither the time nor money to visit friends or relatives and that women would have to neglect their roles in the domestic sphere, accepted as a given in the report, in order to assist in any attempt to make a smallholding profitable.³² Southern perceives the dangers which might arise from modern, positivistic perpetration of the values of 'enterprise' that might correspond with Ashby's understanding of small farmers and might, through studies other than this one, infiltrate the history of small businesses, such as farmers, and then have a reactionary effect on the present. Southern notes the existence of a 'recent push for enterprise as a panacea for deprivation in the developed world' which 'stems directly from the positive notions attached to enterprise rather than any clear theoretical or empirical framework' and is part of a 'generic discourse concerning its progressive

³¹ Ashby, 'Some Human and Social Factors', p.91.

³² NA/MAF/48/26; NA/MAF/48/88.

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qualities'.³³ Storey states that, 'failure is endemic to the small firm sector';³⁴ concentration of capital means that the kind of small businesses dealt with in this study would be under particular threat in the western economies in relatively recent times: 'In the US, only 37.2 percent of new firms with one to 4 employees created in 1976-8 survived for 6 years.'³⁵

The study of the behaviour and the expression of the attitudes of members of social classes to one another appears to have grown in popularity in the wake of the research of Bourdieu,³⁶ as does the status of small businesses and entrepreneurship in the wake of the neoliberal, post-Fordist triumph in the 1980s.³⁷ The fate of small-scale farmers in the interwar period should act as a group warning to anybody who believes that small business operates in the economy in an equal relationship with larger businesses. The one difference between the future study of the small businesses of today and that of the small farmers of the interwar years is that sources relating to the modern petite bourgeoisie will constitute an embarrassment of riches.

The apparent dearth of sources of immediate or direct relevance to the relationships between small-scale farmers and the rest of rural society has meant that statistics have been used to represent them. They have shown, fairly conclusively, that the economic fortunes of small-scale farmers as a whole were

³³ Southern, A., 'Introduction: Enterprise and Deprivation' in, *Enterprise, Deprivation and Social Exclusion: the Role of Small Business in Addressing Social and Economic Inequalities*, ed. by Southern, A. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp.1-15, (p.1).

³⁴ Storey, D.J., *Understanding the Small Business Sector* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.93.

³⁵ Ibid., p.96.

³⁶ Devine, F., and Savage, M., 'The Cultural Turn, Sociology and Class Analysis', in *Rethinking Class; Culture, Identities and Lifestyle*, ed. by Devine, F., Savage, M., Scott, J., and Crompton, R. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp.1-23.

³⁷ Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, pp.1-51.

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in decline in the interwar period. If the interwar period is to be represented as one of mixed fortunes in agriculture, then stress should be laid on the small-scale farmers who were the victims of misfortune; if it is to be represented as one of success, small-scale farmers should be ignored. The study of the interwar countryside, to date, demonstrates that the latter approach would be a continuation of the norm.

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