

Contents

List of maps and tables	vii
General Editor's preface	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
Abbreviations	xiii
1 Introduction	1
Attitudes towards the 'peasantry'	5
The outlook of small farmers	8
Commercially orientated cultivators	10
The dual economy	11
The small farmers of Brent Marsh	13
2 The Brent Marsh parishes and their inhabitants	16
The moors	20
Common meadow and other grazing rights	25
Communications and markets	27
Population	29
Non-agricultural occupations	33
3 Landholding and local society	39
The manors	39
Customary tenure	46
The switch to leasehold for lives	64
Free and copyhold land in the provision for children	66
The use and attraction of copyhold for lives	72
Conclusion	79
4 Making a living from the land	81
Land use in the Levels	81
Farming in the Levels	87
The production of individual farmers	100
The income of small farmers and landholders	104
Commercial leasing in the Levels	111
5 Family and inheritance in Brent Marsh	117
Handing on assets to children	117
Payment of legacies and the economic effects	135
Conclusion	139
6 Wealth, society and national politics	161
Wealth in the Levels	163
Growth of religious divisions	172

Grass roots politics in the Civil War	177
Reactions to the Commonwealth and Interregnum	178
Political attitudes in the later seventeenth century	182
Conclusion	192
7 Small farmers and early modern agriculture: an obstacle to change or a commercial contribution?	194
Economic attitudes of small farmers in the Levels	196
Small farmers and economic change	200
Sources and bibliography	202
Index	217

Chapter 1

Introduction

My interest in the small family farmer began many years ago, at a time when the image of early modern farming, in both general agricultural histories and detailed local studies, was very different from what I knew about farming in Somerset. The history of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries revolved around the agricultural revolution, with the changes which took place in tenure, farming practices and farm sizes, and many conclusions about those aspects were often based on limited local studies.¹ Copyhold tenure was seen as weak, with copyholders at the mercy of manorial lords, who were removing them to reorganise their land into large farm units.² Small landholders and cultivators were seen as economically backward and a block to the increase in agricultural production which was necessary to make possible the industrial revolution and the creation of a workforce no longer involved in agriculture but free to work in industry. Small cultivators were not big enough to specialise and could not afford important innovations to increase production; therefore, they could not contribute to the country's output and were regarded as little more than subsistence peasants who were in the process of disappearing.

At that time Robert Brenner published his Marxist-based analysis of the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe to explain why agricultural capitalism, leading to an industrial revolution, happened first in England rather than elsewhere. It provoked much criticism and many published responses, eventually gathered together with Brenner's original article and rebuttal as *The Brenner Debate*.³ The limitations of his evidence made it easy to criticise him: with the vast variety of landscapes, manorial types and economies in England, one can always find a manor or parish somewhere to support or destroy almost any model of change, and there was not enough evidence to show which (if any) was the most common or influential model for the country as a whole. However, his work had the effect of focusing much subsequent attention by medieval and early modern historians on both this period of transition and the emergence of agrarian capitalism – attention which included several substantial

1 e.g. J.D. Chambers and G.E. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution 1750–1880* (London, 1966); E. Kerridge, *The Agricultural Revolution* (London, 1967). A handful of studies of individual parishes, such as W.G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant* (Chichester, 2008), and M. Spufford, *Contrasting Communities: English Villagers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1974), are constantly cited to support national trends.

2 R.H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1967 reprint of 1912 edn).

3 T.H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpin (eds), *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge, 1985).

The World of the Small Farmer

works on the nature of agrarian society and economy in the early modern period,⁴ though again using studies of one parish or a limited area as an illustration.

A significant element of the argument in Brenner's original article was the insecurity of peasant tenure in England, based largely on the work of Tawney⁵ and firmly directed at the sixteenth century as the period of change. When challenged by historians who could show, for example, that legal security for copyholders existed in the sixteenth century,⁶ he dismissed this as a later development after the 'damage' had been done, and asserted that the real period of insecurity for customary tenants was in the fifteenth century, before copyhold had developed fully and received legal protection from the common law and equity courts. The insecurity of customary tenure was important to his argument because it implied that manorial lords were able to turf out customary tenants, seize their lands, adding it to the demesne, and change their tenure willy-nilly,⁷ in line with the Marxian model of the dispossession of the peasantry by the landowners. Demesne was widely let on commercial leases in the fifteenth century, and Brenner identified this as the central pivot of change that led to agrarian capitalism, by allowing subsequent landlords (300 years later) to use the classic capitalist leasing structure for a large portion of the land of each manor; he thus pushed back the origins of the transition to capitalism into the Middle Ages. Although lords were reluctant to move to commercial leasing, the process is still seen as a typical class struggle in Marxist terms, with the lords oppressing the peasantry and destroying their chances of establishing legally secure, freehold rights over their land (unlike the situation Brenner identifies in France).

The difficulty is that there are no comprehensive figures for any of this. For example, Brenner's figure for the amount of demesne land as just under a third of all agricultural land in England is based on Kosminsky's work on the Hundred Rolls of 1279, which cover only a band of manors across the south Midlands from Suffolk to Warwickshire (784 vills).⁸ This demesne total was subsequently augmented by Campbell to cover 800 vills, but it is still only perhaps 6 per cent of the total number of vills in England, and, as Kosminsky pointed out, they all belong to a somewhat economically and socially homogeneous part of the country. Campbell, who also considered figures for lay-owned demesne derived from early fourteenth-century inquisitions *post mortem* covering most of England, concluded that demesne land may have formed from a fifth to a third of lowland England, but his figures do not include the sizeable holdings of the Church.⁹ The actual amount of demesne land involved is, perhaps, only important

4 e.g. H.R. French and R.W. Hoyle, *The Character of English Rural Society: Earls Colne, 1550–1750* (Manchester, 2007); J. Whittle, *The Development of Agrarian Capitalism: Land and Labour in Norfolk, 1440–1580* (Oxford, 2000).

5 Tawney, *Agrarian Problem*.

6 e.g. P. Croot and D. Parker, 'Agrarian Class Structure and the Development of Capitalism: France and England Compared', in Aston and Philpin, *The Brenner Debate*, pp. 79–90.

7 Aston and Philpin, *Brenner Debate*, pp. 293–6.

8 E.A. Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirteenth Century* (London, 1956), p. 74.

9 B.M.S. Campbell, *English Seigneurial Agriculture, 1250–1450* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 37, 57–8.

in relation to France (which had much less), but, even so, the smaller the area the less the significance of the 'large demesne farms' in relation to the English economy and economic change.

The other assumption, though, about how much customary land was taken by lords and added to their demesne, is based on even shakier ground: about half a dozen studies of limited areas or individual estates in which it can be shown that this occurred.¹⁰ With such a sweeping generalisation, it is not possible to know how much land was involved or whether this was a new and major change in tenures or just the kind of pattern of change in tenure (both from *and* to customary tenure) that was observed, for example, by Kosminsky in the thirteenth century and has been studied in detail for southern England more recently, where again leased land at times changed back to heritable (customary) tenure.¹¹ A variety of tenurial adaptations emerged in the fifteenth century, as lords sought tenants, tenants sought better terms and customary tenure devolved into copyhold. In some manors demesne was actually added to the amount of copyhold in the fifteenth century, and often left a legacy of difficulties for subsequent copyholders, who did not have the protection of custom for those holdings when, in the later sixteenth century, manorial lords wanted to make further changes.¹²

The Marxian model of the change from feudalism to capitalism, involving the dispossession of the agrarian population from the land, is accepted by an ideologically diverse range of historians as being the major element of change in England's economic history, but Marx's analytical modelling is not very helpful to historians trying to describe how, why or what actually happened in the changes in agrarian society and economy that we can observe in the evidence from the fourteenth century onwards. Marx had no good sources for English medieval history available to him, one reason why his account of the transition is so difficult to accept, especially for medievalists,¹³ and his sketchy treatment of feudalism, taken by him and others to include serfdom, has left a wide field for Marxist historians to disagree about the important aspects of medieval development.¹⁴ Clearly the disappearance of feudal land relationships is an important change, but it neither happened as Marx thought nor was its outcome what he anticipated. Subsequent research, especially the detailed work that has been carried out in the last few decades

10 Aston and Philpin, *Brenner Debate*, p. 294 n.

11 M. Bailey, 'The Transformation of Customary Tenures in Southern England, c.1350 to c.1500', *Agricultural History Review*, 62 (2014), pp. 225–6. Also M. Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom in Late Medieval England: From Bondage to Freedom* (Woodbridge, 2014), p. 24; he points out the great variety of tenures and experiences found across England.

12 R.W. Hoyle, 'Tenure and the Land Market in Early Modern England: or a Late Contribution to the Brenner Debate', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. 43/1 (1990), p. 4. In the Glastonbury manors demesne was parcelled out as 'overland' but without customary appurtenances: below, Chap. 3, n.55.

13 West, F.J., 'On the Ruins of Feudalism – Capitalism?' in E. Kamenka and R.S. Neale (eds), *Feudalism, Capitalism and Beyond* (London, 1975), p. 60.

14 J. Hatcher and M. Bailey, *Modelling the Middle Ages: The History and Theory of England's Economic Development* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 71–2.

The World of the Small Farmer

on medieval cultivators and landholders, as well as on their relationships with the urban economy,¹⁵ has shown us a far more complex and interesting medieval society than is encompassed by feudalism alone, particularly in countering the picture of the stereotypical medieval 'peasant', trapped on a manor and in subsistence farming. As a recent survey of medieval economic developments suggests, what we are looking at in the earlier period is the development of a more widespread commercial economy in farming, industry and trade, ready to take advantage of technical changes that made large-scale capitalism both possible and necessary.¹⁶

The whole concept of an 'agricultural revolution' is equally, if not more, problematic in understanding the process of economic and social change. This revolution is seen as a set of interdependent strands that inevitably worked together to lead to rural capitalism, partner of the Industrial Revolution, but it has become a straitjacket in the assessment of the early modern agrarian economy, limiting the way in which agricultural change is viewed. This monolithic model is not the only possibility, however: Robert Allen's study of the south Midlands, for example,¹⁷ shows that the strands making up the 'revolution' can be separated out, and that any one strand may not be necessary for all the others. For example, increased grain yields, essential to support a non-agricultural population, were not dependent on enclosure or the engrossing of holdings into large farms: yeomen and peasants using better seeds were largely responsible (and this increase occurred all over north-western Europe). The increased efficiency of large farms, achieved by shedding labour, was not necessary to provide labour for industry in the eighteenth century: the increased labour availability came a hundred years before industry was ready to absorb it. And, importantly, the increased income that landlords received from tenurial and land-use changes in the eighteenth century was not part of a symbiotic change that funded agricultural improvements, but, rather, came at the expense of farmers and labourers, with the latter increasingly under- or un-employed and dependent on poor relief. The traditional agricultural revolution often reads like an apologia for the landowning class, a justification for their expropriation of agricultural profits as being necessary for economic and industrial development, but most of the profits seem to have been spent on luxury housing and goods, flamboyant display and gambling rather than on rural investment. The presence of large landowners has been shown to be unnecessary for agricultural progress and productivity in some modern peasant/smallholder societies, while the creation of large farms is not the only model of efficiency and economic progress that can be found.¹⁸

15 Much of this surveyed and analysed in C. Dyer, *An Age of Transition? Economy and Society in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2007).

16 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

17 R.C. Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman: The Agricultural Development of the South Midlands 1450–1850* (Oxford, 1992).

18 F. Ellis, *Peasant Economics: Farm Households and Agrarian Development* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 1993), pp. 201–21; R. McC. Netting, *Smallholders, Householders: Farm Families and the Ecology of Intensive, Sustainable Agriculture* (Stanford, CA, 1993), pp. 27, 147–51; Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman*, pp. 307–1.

Another strand commonly seen as an essential part of the agrarian and commercial revolution in this period is specialisation, both in agricultural output and in economic activities generally. That this is necessary to achieve economic progress and material enrichment has now been challenged, however, by detailed analyses of probate inventories in two counties between 1600 and 1750. Thus, whereas in Cornwall agricultural specialisation reflected increasing poverty, particularly when household production such as spinning declined, in Kent the opposite was true: production did not become specialised and by-employment continued alongside a growth in material wealth, as in that county by-employment was not an indicator of self-sufficiency or a desperate search for a living but an indication of 'entrepreneurial drive' and greater market involvement.¹⁹

Attitudes towards the 'peasantry'

The main drawback of the classic 'transition to capitalism' model from my point of view is the concomitant attitudes, held by Marx and by both supporters of Brenner and those challenging him, towards the so-called peasants, passive victims of the march towards capitalism: that the medieval and early modern English 'peasantry' were happy to stay as subsistence farmers; that they had to be forced to become market orientated; that only large-scale producers would be market-orientated and make a worthwhile contribution; that changes to leasing were forced on peasants, who were only interested in staying on their own little plot.

'Peasant' must be one of the most ambiguous and misused appellations in all of historical writing, but, though its use is frequently criticised, it has become all-pervasive: it is widely used to describe the average old-fashioned cultivator, holding land by customary tenure and farming in traditional ways, to distinguish them from tenant farmers holding by rack-rent tenures and more modern arrangements. The use of 'peasant' in relation to English agrarian history is vague and general – the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'peasant' as any country-dweller from farmer to labourer – but peasants are usually taken to mean small pre-industrial owner-occupiers who were rarely more than subsistence farmers.²⁰ Since most peasants were supposed to have disappeared in England in the face of agrarian development in the seventeenth century,²¹ it follows that they were economically backward and an obstacle to progress.

The use of the term peasant in medieval and early modern English history was challenged many decades ago by Alan Macfarlane, who defined peasant societies as having the following economic features: property owned by the household or family and not individuals, with the head of the household acting as 'manager' for the family; farm labour supplied primarily by family members, with wage labour rare; the family

19 M. Overton *et al.*, *Production and Consumption in English Households, 1600–1750* (Abingdon, 2012), pp. 170–74.

20 A. Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism: The Family, Property and Social Transition* (Oxford, 1978), p. 10, gives examples of this use.

21 J. de Vries, *Economy of Europe in an Age of Crisis: 1600–1750* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 82–3.