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**'THE RUIN OF RURAL ENGLAND': AN
INTERPRETATION OF LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY
AGRICULTURAL DEPRESSION, 1879-1914.**

by

JASON LEWIS ROBERTS

**A Doctoral thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
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ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts a re-interpretation of late nineteenth-century agricultural depression, specifically in England, by complementing economic histories to suggest a hitherto neglected cultural component equally defined Victorian comprehension of both the phenomenon's geographic distribution and symbolic form. Adopting recent theoretical shifts in historical geography that validate the use of literary evidence in combination with economic data sources, the thesis claims depression was constructed from an accretion of mythologised layers of meaning deposited unconsciously or otherwise. These symbolic forms influenced spatial outcomes both in material and imaginary realms, and the nature of debate at varying levels from farming debates to intellectual discourses.

The thesis examines three distinct examples of the accumulation and distribution of depression symbolism and how each signification was acted upon by different discursive communities. Firstly, attention will be directed towards farming behaviour and the consumption of depression myth. Critically the thesis suggests within farming, depression emerged as a state of mind that inhibited the production of indigenous solutions, thus further propagating depression. Secondly, the thesis moves on to examine how the technicalities of agrarian debate were seized by wider national debates, thus further codifying the depression with numerous social anxieties such as *fin de siècle* fears, national destabilisation and racial degeneration. Interestingly, icons of failure conferred upon depression within this higher level of discursive interaction are returned to the parochial level, further influencing farming behaviour. An additional implication suggests the geography of depression is heavily skewed towards a perceived threat to an invented homeland at a time of emergent national identities.

Finally, the thesis considers an agrarian-led response to farm failure, the introduction of small holdings and the philosophy of *la petite culture*, as a potential solution. The theoretical basis of land reform campaigns envisaged a major overhaul of the failed rural order of patrician sponsored agriculture, yet were influenced by the accumulated mythology of depression. Thus farm failure as conceived within imaginary geographies proved as persuasive in interpreting depression as physical expressions of distress in real space.

KEYWORDS: Agriculture; Depression; Geography; Victorian; Englishness; Degeneration; National Identity; Small Holdings.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Once there was life in rural England. That life is vanishing like a dream.

C.F.G. Masterman, (1909) *The Condition of England*.

Realism may be necessary to survival, but unless people are also touched by fantasy, they risk imprisonment in their own narrow worlds.

Yi-Fu Tuan, (1990) *Realism and Fantasy in Art, History and Geography*.

Introduction

1.1 *Disengaging Trenchant Histories*

A standard chronology exists within the history of nineteenth-century British agriculture, a seamless narrative neatly categorized into three economic periods: flux, Golden Age and depression.¹ Following unprecedented economic success through the middle decades of the century, the established history of the age records a marked downturn in agrarian profits. The eventual bankruptcy of farmers across Britain and the dereliction of once productive fields was compounded by a rural population exodus to British cities or the more prosperous soils of the Empire. As S.B. Saul notes, the period of wider industrial depression in Britain and abroad dating roughly from the mid-1870s to the outbreak of World War I has been claimed by economic historians as a financial watershed. However, assuming an economy does not operate a discrete, detached function, the period represented much more than an uncomfortable transition to mature capitalism.²

This thesis offers a reworking of the somewhat trenchant historical readings of late nineteenth-century agricultural depression and the associated rural regeneration movement. It attempts to offer an additional, cultural/historical geographical interpretation of agricultural depression by disassembling some of the more rigid and impenetrable econometric meanings. Simultaneously, a hitherto undisclosed cultural signification encompassing expressions of *fin de siècle* anxiety; the right to land and defining nationhood is asserted.³ My contention, though not denying human suffering and a material actuality, focuses upon an alternative history. It argues for a re-envisionment of depression to comprehend a wider cultural meaning to economic freefall, proclaiming depression and its strike at the rural heart of the English race was of greater consequence to many prominent Victorian thinkers than the actual economics of agriculture.⁴ Indeed, P.A. Graham suggested that the rural exodus, the social manifestation of depression, attracted the 'most acute intellects in England'

transforming the issue beyond a farming problem.⁵ However, a collective national consciousness was one constituent of a complex discourse of failure that also embraced individual agrarian perceptions and farming psychologies.⁶ By re-interpreting depression, a whole series of previously ignored concepts such as nostalgia, bucolic utopianism and reactionary modernism can be inserted into historical debate that liberate strictly economic readings of farming distress.

Depression as a national conceptualisation, distinct from functionalist perspectives held by the farming community, mediated a broader socio-economic insecurity, representing an inability to reconcile industrial modernism with the old semi-feudal land system that dominated southern English agriculture. A reactionary culture emerged that celebrated previous 'golden ages', often invoking a peasant farmer myth. A succession of texts from a loose affiliation of authors attempted to depict a rural reality of hardship diametrically opposed to roseate Pastoralism. The genre, what could be termed the Condition of Rural England movement, succeeded in performing a major role in translating esoteric farming issues into effortlessly consumable meanings for the benefit of urban dwellers.⁷ Yet a parallel reading of depression flourished towards the end of the century manifesting common urban pathologies, such as racial degeneracy, an urban-bred crisis that exhibited meagre observance to the authentic issue of rural depopulation. The two-dimensional depression of depth and distribution, was supplemented by the addition of a symbolic layer that destabilised the economic foundation of failure. Depression within this invented realm attacked the most symbolically English elements of the countryside as iconology proved more potent than actual material content.

1.2 Chapter and Thesis Outline

This introductory chapter attempts to address the concerns and motivations behind the production of this thesis. To achieve this aim, the chapter will initially recite a standard general history of depression and subsequently discuss how economic and social histories have gradually produced diverging representations of the period. A similar shift in approaches to source material and the study of phenomena has led to a gradual paradigm shift in historical geography over the last twenty years and this is duly noted. The final sections outline underlying themes and subtexts that informed both agrarian and non-specialist discourses on farming distress. To aid comprehension of these motifs, the notion of a culturally created depression constructed from three layers of meaning is raised first. These layers - individual farmer perception; a broad national-level debate and the small holding response that directly addressed the meanings promulgated by the first two layers - each form a distinctive and chronologically ordered section within the thesis.

Though each section invokes different geographically-based conceptions of depression in both real and imagined space, certain themes, issues, events and personalities are continually referenced to interlace discrete historical narratives. The aim of each Section is to show how interpretations of depression were repeatedly revised. Section One reconceptualises the notion of depression to suggest that farmers often depicted a version of failure quite removed from what economic evidence told them. However, as the second part of the section discloses, the source material that formed the basis to such claims was heavily contaminated with bias and prejudice that not only manipulated popular farming opinion at the time, but subsequently distorted historical accounts written since. While Section One concentrates on the farming mindset, Section Two reveals how the depression was re-envisioned by growing non-specialist interests in the implications of depression, such as a fear of racial decay and the loss of an increasingly-cherished rural existence. This new multi-dimensional comprehension of depression was not only returned to farmers to feed their latent pessimism but was also the version most widely published. The third section draws upon the most vocal solution to depression: the imposition of land reform. Crucially, by looking at the ideology behind specifically agrarian schemes to revitalise the rural economy reveals how myth and fact, specialist and non-specialist, local and national readings of failure were reworked into a plan to confront depression. The conclusion that follows will then be used to suggest that as a subject, the non-economic dimension to depression has not been sufficiently explored, particularly from a geographical perspective. Rather simplistically, one could comprehend each chapter as the accumulation of another layer of meaning to depression, that rather than burying economic issues deeper under myth, reveal the manipulations of facts that allow the depression to be read initially by farmers as an unfortunate aberration of bad harvests induced by poor weather, through to the mechanism to initiate various land reform programmes in a reaction against industrial modernism for the sake of English nationhood.

1.3 General Histories of the Depression

The statistical nature of the depression is the only interest to this thesis. However, the establishment of a framework upon which a re-interpretation of failure can be affixed is required. The depression can be read as a series of unforeseen contingencies and failed ventures by the diminished saleable value of agricultural products and compromised profit margins.⁸ The premier economic, social and political role agriculture occupied evaporated as farming was negated to a relatively minor role in the national interest.

In response to poor returns, farmers implemented adjustments to production as British farming entered a nadir that extended, with minor fluctuations, until World War II, a crisis scenario following three decades from 1840 to 1870 of unbridled capital

outlay on long term investments such as drainage, farm buildings and artificial fertilizers.⁹ The physical degeneration of the countryside, prompted by diminished levels of investment capital, rendered the depression palpable and fatalistic tendencies tangible.¹⁰ Farm land, both arable and pasture was transformed as the maintenance of fields and hedgerows deteriorated in quality, induced by a shift from labour intensive methods which had in turn been prompted by a run of losses and exacerbated by rural depopulation.¹¹ In 1881, for example, the Shropshire Chamber of Agriculture declared field maintenance in the county was highly deficient.¹² Manicured 'high farming' landscapes from the middle decades of the nineteenth-century succumbed to an abandoned vision.¹³

Other physical parameters of depression surfaced. Farm failure provoked a conversion from arable cultivation to permanent grass, a direct response to the collapse of the cereals market and the inundation of foreign imports, mainly from Russia and North America.¹⁴ Foreign competition was arraigned by farmers as a cause of the arable price slump and the later decrease in home livestock production in a second wave of depression. Following the initial price collapse, arable farmers increasingly looked to dairy products and grazing techniques to circumvent foreign opposition. Until the arrival of refrigerated meats from Australia, New Zealand and Argentina, conversion had yielded a profit. Numerous farmers were, however, undone by their inexperience as cattle farmers. Frequently the conversion process itself, which required extensive 'cleaning' of the soil before laying down grass, contributed to farming downfall. In response to competition, a highly vocal campaign for the return of Protectionist measures was incited.¹⁵ Nevertheless, farmers had over thirty years from the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 to anticipate the global expansion of agrarian markets, exposing the industry to criticisms of business malpractice and poor investment decisions.¹⁶ British meat farmers had not been inundated with foreign produce, the introduction being more gradual than feared. Contrary to the catastrophic scenarios played out on the pages of *The Times* or the Final Report of the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression, at the commencement of World War I, home farmers still dominated livestock production.¹⁷

Year	Arable	Pasture	Total
1875	18 104 000	13 312 000	31 416 000
1885	17 202 000	15 342 000	32 544 000
1895	15 967 000	16 611 000	32 578 000

Table 1: The Conversion from Arable to Pastoral Farming Expressed in Acres.
 Figures extracted from The Final Report of the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression Cd 8540 (1897)¹⁸

Despite record investment levels, capital input during the 'Golden Age' had been disproportionately applied.¹⁹ Collins and Jones reveal that upon the heavy clays of Essex and eastern Leicestershire, investment in drainage on land that needed it most had been inadequate.²⁰ The irony of this misdirection of capital becomes only too clear when the second most cited cause of depression, a series of bad harvests between 1874 and 1879 in response to inclement weather is considered. Despite a tendency by farmers to deny responsibility for their own financial distress, the role of the weather in exacerbating depression does hold firm.²¹ Apart from harvest failure and crop destruction by heavy rain, climatic problems were not restricted to the arable industry. Wet seasons and excessive dampness incurred losses of up to six million animals through foot rot.²² Yet farmers demanded long-term legislation, most obviously Protection, despite their own logic suggesting that depression was the result of a temporary climatic blip.

The decrement economic landscape presented significant upheavals to the landowning power base. Evidence from the Bury St. Edmunds area of Suffolk revealed that seven estates varying from 2,500 acres to 15,000 acres had been sold between the start of the depression and the second Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression.²³ Estate owners were burdened with the continued need for increased expenditure throughout the depression to maintain tenantry levels and keep land in production.²⁴ Landowners, who Perren refers to as the 'prime exemplars of farming', were increasingly attacked for failing to protect English farming through their self-assumed role as custodians of the land.²⁵ An emergent land reform movement questioned the *raison d'être* of a landlordist class.²⁶ Motivations for earlier 'high farming' investment were scrutinised, and as Clemenson testifies, were associated with a belief that maximisation of profits had fallen behind expressions of power and, more blatantly, the pursuit of leisure that accompanied the erasure of peasants by pheasants.²⁷

1.4 *Economic Approaches to Depression and Recent Revisionism*

1.4.1 The Economic Narrative

Numerous comprehensive histories on the depression have been produced reflecting the econometric dominance of the discipline during the 1950/60s.²⁸ The issues of interest are often based upon the debates raised in two commissions that investigated the nature and prevalence of depression.²⁹ Perhaps the most keenly observed historical indicator of depression was the declining value of rents. Perren suggests the economic plight of the landowner was borne of absorbing the initial impact of depression through rent remissions to tenants. As an historical study and contemporary debate, this belief

proves to be a highly contentious and cannot be answered by economic evidence alone. Cormac Ó Gráda has tried to establish the greatest degree of suffering of the traditional agricultural classes by calculating a figure based upon incomes.³⁰

Research into rent indices and prices is still ongoing.³¹ Yet this empirical data fails to offer any absolutes.³² With Fletcher's classic geographic dismantling of the notion of universal depression, suggesting the north-west of England had not recorded similar levels of price slippage and Perren's ultimate assessment that all suffering was relative, the very idea of a *Great Agricultural Depression* can be problematised.³³ A claim of this thesis is that price variables and rental indices are unstable.³⁴ Perhaps the most obvious reasons for this proposition lies not only in the hidden biases of data, and the selective disclosure of certain facts but also in the temporal scale over which empirical conclusions are derived. For example, a percentage decline in prices depended on the length of survey period.

Evidence from the period contends that despite greater production and consumption of statistics by the end of the nineteenth-century, farmers were unable to account accurately for their finances. 'No body of traders', wrote George Jamieson, 'are so uniformly deficient in the principles and so careless in the practice of book-keeping as farmers'.³⁵ Westley Richards branded the fat cattle industry 'amateurish', with farmers guessing weights of carcasses for sale, sometimes under or over-valuing at a punitive financial loss to themselves. A survey of twenty-two farmers at Newark market assessing a carcass weight of 75st 11lb revealed a difference in estimates of 35st 5lb, or in monetary terms 13l 8s 4d.³⁶ Added to the discord on price levels and capital expenditure was Thompson's 'money illusion'. F.M.L. Thompson unearths a major psychological barrier within the farming mind. Its assumption that depression revolved around a notion of 'seeming' that frequently contradicted apparent 'reality' is useful to this thesis. His hypothesis maintains that despite a widespread decline in prices for all goods, not solely agricultural, farmers regarded their drop in income as tantamount to financial failure despite the lack of any diminished purchasing power.³⁷ Such insecurities direct the student to conclude that to establish a literal truth is counter-productive, as the accumulation of knowledge serves only to further destabilise essential truths.

My aim has been to disassemble the econometric comprehension of depression to subsequently reconstruct it as a cultural formation. The inherent danger in this method lies in the distance placed between 'hard' empirical fact and an hypothesis that rejects the dominance of a fiscal component in depression.³⁸ The symbolism of farm failure read individually by Victorians was immensely fluid, intricately shaped by a variety of ideologies, both of the Left and Right and what one terms Ruralist tendencies, a composite doctrine beyond traditional political orthodoxies that celebrated the working of the countryside.³⁹ A rootedness to statistics could prove unhelpful by

creating rigid and occasionally totalistic 'truths' that through repetition emerge as accepted parameters of agrarian failure. One such example from an historical study is evident in the allusion to P.J. Perry's geography of English agricultural bankruptcy.⁴⁰ The geographic distributions of insolvency conform with an accepted understanding of the depression as a southern English phenomenon, offering validity to contemporary claims made by individuals such as Francis Allston Channing, a member of the second Royal Commission on the Depression in Agriculture that '...the north on the whole, has been and still is far better off than in the south'.⁴¹ However, these maps prove highly misleading. Firstly, bankruptcy was the most extreme expression of farm failure and therefore occurred selectively, dependent equally upon personal circumstances rather than geography *per se*.⁴² A cluster of cases in Huntingdonshire may have been a coincidence. Farmers of Hampshire, for example, may *all* have been subjected to similar levels of economic distress as Huntingdonshire farmers, yet proved resilient to liquidation. Perry's maps of bankruptcy, therefore, offer no more than distributions of extreme cases of depression. Secondly, Perry's approach attempts to quantify the unquantifiable. Bankruptcy is a fairly objective state constructed from an obvious fiscal reality: a person declared legally unable to pay their debts. As no set criteria for defining when a farmer was in a state of depression but not bankruptcy existed, any admission to financial adversity remained entirely personal.⁴³ Many farmers refused to accept distress for purely commercial reasons until the eventual recognition that politicians were not going to bail the industry out, in which case such a stance proved improvident.⁴⁴ As shall be addressed later, geography did enact a causal determinant through northern livestock farmers selecting divergent criteria from southern husbandmen to define a state of depression, though this 'geography' of bankruptcy remains distant from the research objectives of Perry.⁴⁵

1.4.2 Social Histories and the Depression

Harris has recently noted the historiographic shift away from 'total histories' towards more nuanced, less essentialist histories. 'Texts, artefacts, and language have replaced institutions, movements and social forces as the substance of what social history is supposed to be about'.⁴⁶ With the broad and numerous input of diverse opinions, interpretations and vocalities into the cultural construction of agrarian depression, I have borrowed heavily from the recent revisionist social histories of Alun Howkins, Martin Wiener and Jeffrey Herf to offer a sensitive awareness of myriad meanings that accompany a late-Victorian rural crisis too often enveloped in economic 'fact'.

Rather than adopting a continuous and pervasive theoretical foundation, this thesis has looked to efforts in both history and geography to destabilise established histories, disengaging from the typical procedure of seeking historical 'truths'. The result is not intended as a sop to hybridism and the aim is to work towards

complementing diverse and separate bodies of work. Samuel and Thompson argued that history had to move away from the tendency to seek out 'reality' in all phenomena.⁴⁷ Rigid 'truths' prove problematic. If a philosophy of different ways of observing phenomena is promoted, then the presence of variant 'realities' rather than a single unified reading had to be accepted. In the case of the late nineteenth-century agricultural depression, realities were not only determined by agrarian class, but also by geographical location. An added complication remained. Sources, assumed in some cases to be authoritative were perhaps the most unstable of all source material. Thus Perry's supposition that evidence and reports collected by the Royal Commission offered reliable data is quite false because the commission was fundamentally flawed by numerous hidden biases within questions posed to witnesses through to membership of the investigative committee.⁴⁸ Perry believed that through examining the reports and witness statements to both Royal Commissions, the 'totality and reality' of depression could be expounded. Evidence presented before the commissions was often of an extreme nature as the opportunity of catching the largely indifferent eye of Parliament was not going to be passed up. Therefore, the question of whose reality was most commonly depicted within certain media required continual re-statement within a more sensitive historical geographic approach.

Perhaps the two most influential authors behind the thesis development have been Alun Howkins and Martin Wiener.⁴⁹ Both have attempted to construct inclusive social histories that link localised cases of broader issues with cultural and intellectual debates of the period such as the growing reaction against industrial progress and assumption of English pastoralism as an essential trait within a definitive national identity.⁵⁰ The popularity of rural romanticism towards the end of the Victorian era, which in many ways acted as an English precursor to later debates identified by Jeffrey Herf in Germany following World War I, was of crucial significance to the study of agrarian depression from a non-economic perspective.⁵¹ Within what Howkins labels the 'discovery of rural England', the growing celebration of rustic values enabled the development of a 'south country' homeland for English observers, creating a mythical national space within the imaginary realm.⁵² Crucially, this thesis, being essentially geographical rather than social history, attempts to ascertain the degree to which such mythologisation shaped either physical geography or the *perceived* geography of depression amongst various social groups, both rural and urban.

As Brian Short reveals in a dissection of images and realities within rural communities, the issue of scale is important to counteract certain establishment interests promulgated by 'national histories'.⁵³ Thus I have attempted to work from the bottom up to understand how the depression emerged as a national crisis from localised farming failure. However, adopting this research strategy appeared equally constrictive. Firstly, establishing tenant farming vocalities proved difficult because of a deficit of

resource material except that recorded by writers on agrarian tours or governmental investigations, which were not exactly frequent in occurrence.⁵⁴ To compound the problem, there was every likelihood that any comments recorded erred on the side of caution for fear of retribution from local landlords. Secondly, farming opinion, despite the rootedness of agriculture within individual parishes was not rigidly 'local' or firmly 'national'. What the thesis does reveal is the level of interaction across space of an individual tended to determine the type of opinion held. As Section One divulges, the average tenant farmer was more concerned with the effects of weather rather than the uncompetitiveness of English farming or the threat posed to the English racial lineage. It is through the transfer of opinions and evidence on the depression between local and national levels that personal biases become encoded, the magnitude of failure distorted and the cases of failure mythologised.

By employing imagery and perception as parameters to define depression, the thesis dispenses with the need to establish the nature of depression through economic statistics alone. However, the statistical basis of historical research into the depression cannot be eschewed. Some attempt has been undertaken to use economic data in association with written evidence, most notably in the estate accounts of Lord Petre's properties in Essex. Textual narratives have been utilized less to back up empirical claims but rather to show how the depression was a multi-dimensional form. Thus the evidence from Essex reveals wildly fluctuating levels of rental arrears and cases of abandoned tenancies. Contrary to the statistics, the land agent for Lord Petre annually reported a recessionary fatalism amongst the tenant farmers. Equally, the accounts contain a number of potential biases used implicitly to disguise the true depth of distress. Even within the smallest of locales, the meanings, metaphors and signs of depression emitted mixed messages that make the establishment of a definitive version of agricultural depression impossible.

1.5 *The Role of the Historical Geographer*

1.5.1 Geography and Landscape

Historical geography can be used to reveal spatial interaction (or in the case of depression, a lack of it) impinged directly upon human action. Within the subject of this study, space offered a constraint to knowledge yet paradoxically, a contemporary territorialization of space through the search for *national* identity indelibly contorted the depression into something more than financial mismanagement. As Niek Koning most recently testifies, agricultural depression was not an intra-national phenomenon, but rather an international crisis manifest in a variety of forms across Europe as agrarian capitalism occupied a troubled position in the wider global capitalist system.⁵⁵ Farmers still entrenched within parochial confines, increasingly had to withstand global

competition. British agriculturalists in particular failed to adapt expeditiously to the emergence of a new world system. Ultimately, the agricultural depression represented a collision of what were mutually-exclusive levels of spatial interaction which were neither reconciled or adequately adapted for the smooth transition into the new economic age.

Satisfied that a role does exist for the historical geographer, immediately a fresh set of considerations arise, not least the situation of this thesis within modern theoretical developments in the sub-discipline, most notably the seduction of traditional historiographies by cultural geographic methods and a re-interpretation of conventional definitions of source material.⁵⁶ Typically one such research trend, the recognition of the metaphorical significance of texts from landscapes through to literary resources, permits the rediscovery of evidence previously discarded in favour of economic and statistical data. Freeing a re-conceptualisation of the depression from econometric methodology allows the application of numerous personal accounts and individual interpretations of farming distress, previously considered unhelpful because of their inherent bias. Recently, a series of essays have appeared under the banner of 'new ruralism', critically re-evaluating the need for theory in contemporary rural studies, a genre long associated with empiricism.⁵⁷ Naturally enough, a compelling requirement exists to extend this debate into rural historical geography, embracing the current language and uncertainties of modern geography.

Three issues are raised by the new historical geography research paradigm. Firstly, intellectual challenges posed by cultural theories emancipate historical research enabling the espousal of theoretical developments in cultural geography such as the reconfiguration of the idea of landscape and its inculcation by myth and the imaginary realm.⁵⁸ Such sentiments recognise Alan Baker's claim that there should be a conscious recognition of the role of ideology in shaping the subject, in essence a concentration on attitudes and not just artefacts. Secondly as proposed by Short, landscapes should be considered as socially constructed, and therefore not natural and impassive.⁵⁹ By accepting the influence of ideology, one can conclude landscapes are re-evaluated by a current value system. Thus the agricultural depression becomes the conceptual battleground between two rival contestations of paternal social control and stability on the one hand with social justice and revision on the other.⁶⁰ Thirdly, Stephen Daniels has demonstrated that landscape has 'played a key role in articulating English identity', particularly in its popular idyllic rural signification.⁶¹ He contends that the sense of vernacular in the quintessential English landscape is largely a twentieth-century reading, a fact not necessarily in dispute here, though the celebration of the village within reformist ideology of people such as Jesse Collings, the famous land reformer, is a step towards recognising local cultural forms.⁶² Agricultural depression by threatening to expunge historic English landscapes presented a threat identical to urban industrialism

by severing links with tradition, namely organic village communities and agrarian conventions. The resultant nostalgia fell prey to the misconception that the countryside resided in stasis.

Landscapes are never entirely innocent, rendering their meanings contestable.⁶³ Most obviously landscapes are expressions of ideology and power. In this study English rural landscape meaning merges debates on issues of urbanism, landlordism and rural autonomy.⁶⁴ The vision of the nebulous English agricultural community were subjugated on two counts, firstly by the over-bearance of urban ideas and secondly by the interventionism of the landed classes. Ultimately this is expressed in the rural landscape by the rapid conversion to pasture and subsequent degeneration into abandoned waste land.

Throughout the depression and in proportion to the burgeoning love affair with Pastoral England, urban ideas infiltrated the countryside. Primarily, and most obviously, romanticisation of the rural milieu heightened critical responses towards the farming community by implicating farmers as failed custodians of the (home)land. Secondly, amongst the overwhelmingly urban-influenced corps of rural writers, including authors such as Henry Rider Haggard and W.E. Cooper, opinion attested to the perceived inability of the countryside, and agriculture in particular, to manufacture its own destiny.⁶⁵ Such observations were tailored for an urban readership; their solutions reflected urban concerns such as ensuring food supplies. Even agrarian land reform movements were formulated by urban-based organisations. Both the Rural Labourers' League and the Allotments and Small Holdings Association were formed within the Birmingham Radicalism cell that included one-issue ruralist politicians Joseph Arch and Jesse Collings.⁶⁶

The second major challenge to the autonomy of the farmer and labourer after urban interference originated within the land-owning elite.⁶⁷ The aristocratic tradition of re-creating the countryside within its own myth, principally as an object of spectacle is well known. The depression contentiously offered a further opportunity for the English rural landscape to be modelled within the patriarchal visage. However, if eighteenth-century transformations in association with enclosure had physically re-invented the countryside, the opportunity provided by depression was perceptible only within an imaginary realm through a re-evaluation of cherished qualities such as stability and moral order. In reality, the patriarchal order had been nearly bankrupted by the depression, stifling investment opportunities. Sensitive to a popular longing for the 'old ways', the countryside was repackaged as a ready-made model of the simple life, and with no one dominant political ideology exercising control over the image, the landowning classes asserted their paternalistic doctrines of preserving the customs and lore of old England, and more importantly, curbing social discontent following the National Agricultural Labourers' Union disputes of the early 1870s. Overwhelmingly

rural iconography was southern English, corresponding both to the area customarily accepted as enduring the heaviest degree of failure and an imaginary 'south country' homeland, creating a confluence of significant meaning within a nationalist reassertion of Englishness. Additionally, southern England was the territorial stronghold of patriarchal interests.

Agriculture as a manipulator of landscape forms had traditionally acted in art as a backdrop for political or moral agendas played out in the foreground. The depiction of an agricultural scene typically centred on the wheat harvest, a short period of comparative prosperity and therefore contentment for the labourer though as Stephen Kern identifies, the modernist turn in art at the end of the century begins to recognise the harsher realities of farming.⁶⁸ In art and literature, perhaps until the emergence of the Condition of Rural England writers and the subsequent aversion of the Pastoral gaze, the agricultural landscape is envisioned as a spectacle. The functionalist perspective of the land as a means of survival, a 'lived experience' and an economic lifeline, remains obscured.⁶⁹ The reactionary longing for a simplistic past rustic homeland was in fact an inherently political act to assume ideological control over country values that manipulated the receipt of artistic values accordingly.

1.5.2 The Position of the Author

Inappropriate interpretations and anachronistic theory can enter historical debate. Avoiding the presence of the writer is impossible in any historical synthesis. Original analysis of meaning by an author can be a diverting influence, placing an impediment between subject and reader. The historical geographer has to be conscious of the myths, idealisations and political manoeuvring that infiltrated rural England. Paul Thompson believed Edwardian farmers '...worked in an English countryside which was never more beautiful or *quiet*, [with] great uncut hedges, abundant with flowers and small animals, arching over the *empty* lanes: the beauty of decay'. Problematically, the writer imposes thoroughly modern post-1945 values of a nostalgic remembrance for a less-intensive bucolic vision and assumes a spiritual resonance amongst farmers resident in picturesque serenity. Yet the farming aesthetic of utility, a functionalist view that saw beauty through productivity, conflicted with the wasteland visage of abandoned land. Flower meadows betrayed the unprofitability of agriculture to the arable farmers of southern England. Innocent idioms such as 'quiet' and 'empty' equally convey the ravages of depression.⁷⁰

A cultural/historical geographic approach removes 'objective distance' allowing for a more nuanced approach to question financial assumptions. By adopting a non-objectifying approach, historic accounts and essays are problematised to comprehend rural vocalities, subtle authorial biases and discrete agendas. The authority that these texts proclaim is disputable.⁷¹ Repeated reference to economic 'facts', publicly stated

observations or geographical areas does not secure even spurious accuracy. Whether historical 'truth' is attainable and theoretically consistent is debatable because it assumes the existence of an objective reality. A rich archive of essays on depression should not act as confirmation of 'accepted realities' about the depression. The positionality of every author needs to be problematised. Biases and intentions of prominent public writers such as Rider Haggard or famous experts such as James Long are well known. But many contributory authors to the rural debate have long returned to obscurity, removing any sense of reputation. Either type of writer, definitive or sedulous, prove useful because both encoded an historical reading of depression. However, renowned authority (confused with fame in the case of Rider Haggard) combined with public profile yielded even greater symbolic depth through the typically agenda-setting nature of such individual readings, initiating further debate. Such was Haggard's standing in late-Victorian society, and his obvious genius for touching the public psyche that his prescription of racial decay following prolonged population outmigration from the land contributed significantly to a re-envisionment of depression beyond actual economics.⁷² In addition to individually motivated studies of the depression, books were commissioned in direct response to two public enquiries, either to counter majority conclusions, such as Francis Allston Channing's tome on the political biases of the investigation or support them.⁷³

Public prominence may have created a highly subjective corpus of literature on depression, but objective distance is also undermined by repetition of material and otiose scholarship. A number of recurring cases arise, typically the classically depressed county of Essex and the model small holding solution at Catshill near Bromsgrove. This reliance on selected and well-worn case studies, evident in sociological works on the state of the nation, revealed a dearth of specialist knowledge and a lack of genuine interest in agricultural affairs. The study of Essex and Catshill within this thesis is deliberate in that investigation uncovers important indicators about how Victorians consumed meanings of agrarian depression. Concern for the ultimate manifestations of depression, such as racial decay, hollow national identity and historical discontinuity neglected the causes and initial symptoms, both economic and social. These silences prove equally revealing of the Victorian psyche, lost in grand theoretical flourishes of the *fin de siècle* crisis of ideas.

The question of author and authority should not be restricted to historic texts. Indeed, late-Victorian discourses on accuracy and representation act as useful precursors in establishing the positionalities of late twentieth-century historical geographers. Modern-day geography has recently engaged in similar debates destabilising the 'truthfulness' of representation, not only in communication by an author but through the comprehension of texts by the reader.⁷⁴ As Pile suggests, the new cultural geographic concern with meaning forces the geographer into interpretive

acts that require submersion into the object of research.⁷⁵ The dangers within an interpretative geographical history in this case leave a reconceptualised representation of farming failure dependent upon my assumptions and vigorousness of study.⁷⁶ Any discussion on the role of an author within the production, and ultimate consumption of a text cannot disregard arbitrarily imposed limits of study forced by the neglect of certain sources and during the writing stage, the editing and annotation of collated information.⁷⁷ Such limitations cannot be overcome but they can be compensated for by allowing the gradual and concentric introduction of sources. This process is not passive in that the author actively seeks out literary evidence. My choice of written literature was conscious, because many of the texts employed remained forgotten in the British Library. Potential contestations that the concealed nature of the archive perhaps indicated a relative historical worthlessness would be erroneous because of the diversity of opinion such texts would reveal. Starting from the reports of the Royal Commissions on Agricultural Depression, research was extended in a multi-directional manner, probing, almost prosopographically significant figures that featured in Parliamentary debates, Ruralist discourses and reformist agendas in one direction and archival accounts such as estate records in the other. Despite the temporal linearity of each chapter, the basic premise was to avoid a uni-directional approach to the historical archive. Published accounts could easily be cross-referenced with governmental debates as well as records of direct contact with farmers. It was these conduits between sources that revealed most about the dissemination of meanings of failure, the mythologising process and a psychology of depression. Nineteenth century rural commentators attempted to portray 'truthful' accounts of the depression, but it does not follow that by vocalising these long-hidden tracts, I will have arrived at a 'truthful' historical account. My aim is to establish a portrayal of the depression as a discursive phenomenon. Objective distance is, following such logic, unobtainable.

1.6 Reconfiguring the Evidence

The revisiting of an historic armoury of books, pamphlets and speeches unearthed a series of conceptual problems with regard to the depression. The most obvious inconsistency occurred in a definition of the term 'rural'. 'Non-urban' offered a workable definition, though it imposed a negative intrinsicality within a conceptual dualism, much the same as popular Pastoral writing viewed the town and country as sophisticated and simple life respectively.⁷⁸ As a delineation, this theoretical framework fell some way short of allowing a more nuanced approach that recognised, as Alun Howkins asserted, 'the notion of "one" rural England [as] problematic'.⁷⁹ Howkins's assessment could be, and was, read at many levels. Firstly, geography, or more specifically the location of place in space, played a significant role in shaping life chances, economic fortunes and social interaction, absorbing elements of geology

through to cultural history.⁸⁰ Geography also delineated the spatial limits to the communication of agrarian knowledge, particularly as experienced by different farming communities.⁸¹ Thus the idea of many 'rural Englands' was constructed upon the spatiality of various experiences. A second contention recognised a non-material geography, based upon the imaginary realm of the rural idyll. Created by a dichotomy between 'deep' and 'shallow' England superimposed over rural-urban divisions respectively, the countryside and organic village community exuded the investment of Victorian morality, a soothing spiritualism that offered a retreat from baseless urban society.⁸² Consequently, the rural milieu became an expression of 'real' England by a process Roland Barthes termed 'appropriation by society', alternatively the "ownership" of meaning, rendering the popular depiction of the English countryside an urban abstraction.⁸³ Naturally, this raised important challenges to the very symbolic essence of depression. The phenomenon could equally have assaulted an imaginary rural refuge. Increasingly, agrarian depression was read as less what Niek Koning terms the 'failure of agrarian capitalism', and more a metaphor for a series of cultural anxieties.

This thesis aims to extend historical/geographical debate by hypothesising depression was a *social construction*.⁸⁴ Agrarian depression was fabricated from a multitude of individual conceptualisations, often the product of intense localism or the absence of a structure for the dissemination of agrarian thought and the latest scientific farming research. Consequently, no definitive version of farming distress existed, discrediting the notion of *the 'Great Depression of Agriculture'*.⁸⁵ What emerges, therefore, is a series of diverse readings of failure that metamorphose into imaginary geographies of depression. Gradually, the introduction of a series of leitmotifs of failure through essays, newspaper articles and popular journals harmonised contemporary awareness of rural distress, though the farming industry accepted these generalist statements as secondary to its own expert reading.⁸⁶

Claims that depression embodied a cultural construction lie in the modern day search for an elusive 'feel good' factor. Despite repeated assurances from financial analysts and politicians that the British economy was recovering from the late 1980s recession, the general public remained unconvinced by such optimistic appraisals. The former Chancellor of the Exchequer Norman Lamont's claims of recovery were dismissed as premature political rhetoric by a nation that felt itself to be entrenched in recession. Translating this idea into a nineteenth-century context, explicitly in regard to the parochial contemplation of the agricultural community, one could plausibly suggest that farmers convinced themselves of an imminent collapse of agriculture. Such thinking palsied pro-active solutions. Depression became a mindset, an integral part of the farmer's logical processes. Most obviously a benign farming lobby appeared to acquiesce before its fate. The natural progression from this conceptual standpoint

involved an expansion of the spatial remit, stretching the research beyond a few carefully selected farming communities, recognising that symbols of depression were not all encoded locally.⁸⁷ Situating agrarian depression within literary debate revealed farm failure influenced debates on the state of the nation, definitions of Englishness and the erosion of rural life. In return, the depression was embellished with the attendant symbolism of a *fin de siècle* vision of racial degeneracy and a suspicion of modernist progression.⁸⁸

1.7 *Depression and the Layering of Meaning*

Comprehension of the behaviour of information in space and the popular receipt of meanings, symbols and ideas form a further theme. To facilitate research and analysis, the depression was compartmentalised into three layers of meaning that followed a chronological progression. These layers were firstly, parochial-based action, reflecting individual interpretations of farmers, and the subsequent absence of consensus amongst the farming lobby. The second layer represented the national reading of failure, a discourse fuelled by common Victorian anxieties not directly connected with the depression of agriculture.⁸⁹ The third layer related to the responses toward depression, notably the small holding movement that sought social justice by relocating people 'back on the land', simultaneously dismantling the dominant tripartite system of landlord, tenant farmer and labourer. Focusing on specific campaigns to reform farming unveiled not only perceived impediments to successful agriculture, namely the restricted ownership of land in the hands of a privileged elite, but also collective political and cultural ideas that shaped the depression to best fit their ideological models for land reform and a resolution of the farming crisis.⁹⁰ Thus the pliant nature of depression over time through the accumulation of further mythological layers and the investment of assumptions, prognoses and solutions is revealed.

Deconstruction of the *myth* of depression and the mythologising process emerges as the axis upon which the thesis is drawn. As Brian Short implies, myths represent the *simplification* of a complex cultural act or commodity.⁹¹ Even within the rural realist movement comment is constructed from partial interpretation built upon incomplete knowledge and unconversant composition, removing esoteric technical detail.⁹² At the root of this conundrum lies a Barthesian multiplicity of mythological layers. The absence of a rigid conceptual structure scattered meanings of depression to form a conceptually dispersed phenomenon. This sanctioned the commodification of its very essence by various political agendas.⁹³ The signification of depression was the product of a series of factors, most notably the transferral of knowledge across space, which was facilitated by recent developments in national communications, but simultaneously impeded and warped by prevailing ignorance, lack of interaction and insularity. Thus, on one level, diagnoses and responsibilities for depression were

generated by village localism. Additionally, a determination of the spatial extent of depression emanated from the increased consumption of national print media, and other published material.

This thesis emerges from what Cloke and Thrift have recently identified as a shift in 'writing the rural' to embrace concepts such as nationhood and the territorialization of space by stressing the role of agricultural depression in a cultural climacteric. Depression struck at the very heart of Englishness, forcing thousands from the land at precisely the moment when the nation inverted itself in anticipation of a period of uncertainty.⁹⁴ Critically, the depression acquired a major role in sharpening this symbolic appropriation through the erasure of people, agrarian custom and popularised vistas that perpetuated a nostalgic longing for cherished features in English life.⁹⁵ This social crisis was of greater significance to many prominent Victorian thinkers who accepted the physical endurance and untainted simplicity of rural life as the essence of Englishness over the economics of the farming industry. Chief among such observers, ascendant during the *fin de siècle* age were figures such as G.K. Chesterton, C.F.G. Masterman and R.C.K. Ensor all of whom contended that agriculture was the backbone to the nation by aligning occupation of the soil with broader contemporary searches for a recognisable homeland, an enduring itinerant of any national identity.⁹⁶ Such idealism coursing through the quest to establish a national homeland was a critical requirement claim Williams and Smith in any bid to territorialize national identity in space.⁹⁷ The result from an historical perspective, therefore, is a plausible affirmation of depression as a state of mind as well as a material reality, that it was a cultural discourse on the state of the nation as much an economic failure. Even for contributors to the farming lobby, concern was less for the diminishing market share of home produced wheat and more for the cataclysmic potential of a nation transmogrified into a hollow shell, with the kernel of English nationhood extirpated by the dereliction of agriculture.⁹⁸ At a time of cultural flux, the portrayal of an assault of agrarian depression upon the English rural homeland assumed a sense of doomed inevitability. Farm failure attacked the flourishing urge to preserve, and to late-Victorians the countryside represented an historic artefact worth saving.⁹⁹

1.8 *Submerged Narratives and Underlying Subtexts*

The theoretical assertion of the depression as a state of mind from functionalist through to Pastoral perspectives represents the most persistent hypothesis throughout the thesis. Attention therefore must be directed towards the existence of a number of other narratives interwoven into the study.¹⁰⁰ The issue of localism and knowledge, a second theme, has already been referenced, developing Alun Howkins's proposition that rural change was not precipitated on a cataclysmic national scale, but evolved through a series of piecemeal developments at the village level.¹⁰¹ Howkins recognises within

such small-scale social structures the bankruptcy of just one farmer presented upheaval of an almost seismic nature. A parochial sense of failure exaggerated ill-fortune. When extended over forty years, a notional feeling of protracted malaise is cultivated.¹⁰²

A third major theme conceives how the depression shaped and, in turn was shaped by, broader cultural discourses. Laqueur's thesis of 'cosmic disaster' in late nineteenth-century social consciousness, the *fin de siècle* fear of collective loss and irreducible change, proves useful in determining how representations of farming angst by the literary texts of a rural realist movement distorted the narrative of functionalist fears.¹⁰³ Esoteric financial anxieties are written in a language digestible to an urban readership. Consequentially, another semiological layer is added through authorial bias, intentional or otherwise, permitting the foundation of later conceptualisations of depression upon second order myths, divested of any material 'reality' and heavily loaded with preconditioned symbolism.¹⁰⁴ This thesis will, therefore, suggest that these mediations of psychological depression are equally valid as objects of study as agricultural returns or evidence presented before two Royal Commissions on agricultural depression.¹⁰⁵

A fourth motif refers to an intimate relationship between depression and rural idealisation, lucidly expressed through the seduction of peasant spiritualism behind agrarian land reform. This connection is directly bound up in the late Victorian dilemma over English national identity, a discourse that pulled in opposite directions reflecting reactionary or modernising tendencies. Fierce localisms evoked poetic visions of Medieval havens and were commonly revered as national composite diversity, the vernacular culture, was cherished. In an associated cultural response, reformers attempted to revive a lost past, the golden age of yeoman farmer and peasant land holder.¹⁰⁶ Umberto Eco notes that late nineteenth-century European society shared a love of the Middle Ages to redefine national identities built upon 'closed' political utopias free from foreign influence. Both Mayhew and Daniels have separately suggested landscapes can also be read as symbols of an historic moment.¹⁰⁷ This proposition, asserts the Victorian rural landscape was open to a Medieval re- envisionment in the form of reactionary nostalgia. Even explicitly agrarian, as opposed to communistic solutions of returning people to the soil, such as the proposals of Jesse Collings, offered an awareness of the inherent need for an agricultural component within any sense of identity.¹⁰⁸ Land reformist designs for the revitalisation of organic village communities with widespread individual land ownership represented the rationalisation of the rural social ideal into the smallest areal scales: allotments and small holdings.¹⁰⁹ Thus the depression impinged upon debates on peasant revivalism and ultimately the state of the race. The content of these discussions was far removed from the perspective of the individual farmer. The Victorian idyll became a highly politicised commodity, with all ideological orthodoxies embracing peasant revivalism as more than

a shameless retreat into fantasy, but also a route out of prolonged depression.¹¹⁰ My aim, therefore is to address the nature of reformism, questioning whether the movement attacked the causes of depression, ignored them altogether in anticipation of a major political redirection or pandered to arcadian escapism.¹¹¹

The final theme builds upon a notion of 'landlord blame' wherein the presence of depression questioned the financial judgement of landowners. To counter reformist vitriol, much as the celebration of the quintessential English countryside, of hedgerows and neat villages, was an approbation of patriarchal values, the depression was manipulated to portray an increasingly anachronistic semi-feudal order in markedly less harsh tones by controlling the content of significant debates on the causes and solutions to depression, most notably the prominent Royal Commissions.¹¹² Evidence suggests the aristocracy forged the depression into a meaningful tool to preserve the existing social order for the sake of enduring rural stability, a landlord-as-custodian belief that according to English lore had been the backbone of previous economic success and the wider security of the nation.¹¹³ Though it is not my intention to engage in a politico-economic treatise on the silencing of the collective masses, it is a stated aim to explore the notion of power and autonomy and the challenges depression presented, touching upon notions of social hegemony.¹¹⁴ In his recent history on agricultural depression, Richard Perren drew attention to biases in the membership of both Royal Commissions on agriculture. The dominance of one social group, in this case landowners, represents a significant interest to the thesis because this partiality skewed official responses to depression in terms of action and statement. Furthermore, the distortion was reproduced in Lord Ernle's seminal history of the period and repeated in numerous histories since.¹¹⁵ Issues such as shortfalls in rent dictated debate at the expense of material issues such as the labouring class withdrawal from the land. Suppression of alternative voices led to an assumption that the farming industry was unified in its response to failure, a scenario that possibly quashed meaningful debate. The relative absence of the small holding resolution from the report of the second commission on depression proves pertinent.¹¹⁶ It is essential, therefore, to augment and extend historic debate with new cultural components, complementing the richness of current research.

¹It is important to differentiate between Britain and England, though to many Victorian commentators the two were interchangeable. The depression struck Wales, Scotland and Ireland with varying degrees of magnitude, but overwhelmingly, the contemporary cultural signification of depression expressed English values and aesthetics.

² The wider signification of the great depression not only reflected a series of social anxieties but also the increase, both numerically and in geographical distribution, of print media. Brassey recorded in 1879 that markets had recorded a similar downturn in the iron, steel and cotton manufacturing

industries. In agriculture, the declining profitability was more visible, etched onto the English landscape as unproductive abandoned land, thus leaving the industry exposed to a closer degree of scrutiny, and censure. S.B. Saul, *The Myth of the Great Depression, 1873-1896* (London 1964) 9; T. Brassey, *The Depression of Trade Nineteenth Century* 5 (1879) 788-812.

³Some of the more established histories on the agricultural depression include: P.J. Perry, 'Where was the 'Great Agricultural Depression'? A Geography of Agricultural Bankruptcy in Late Victorian England and Wales *Agricultural History Review* 20 (1972) 30-45; P.J. Perry, *British Farming in the Great Depression, 1870-1914* (Newton Abbot 1974); T.W. Fletcher, The Great Depression of English Agriculture *Economic History Review* 13 (2nd series) (1961) 417-432; C.S. Orwin and E.W. Whetham, *History of British Agriculture, 1846-1914* (London 1964); R. Perren, The Landlord and Agricultural transformation 1870-1900 *Agricultural History Review* 20 (1970) 36-51. Richard Perren's recent publication has shown greater interest in the social problems of depression, but the underlying assumption remains that depression was an economic phenomenon and in no way a mediation of some sort of national neurosis. R. Perren, *Agriculture in Depression, 1870-1940* (Cambridge 1995).

⁴Contemporary quasi-theoretical narratives on the meanings of depression were too commonplace to list here. Throughout the thesis, however, I draw upon a number of such treatise published in a variety of forms, with an obvious preference for short, rhetorical political pamphlets. This is not to suggest, however, that the debate surrounding the agrarian financial collapse was conducted *purely* along party political lines, rather that it expressed a series of self-interests, counter-interests and prejudices. An emergent Ruralist genre (See Chapter 3 on the Condition of Rural England movement) generated an interest in the agricultural depression beyond economics, and through the work of writers such as Henry Rider Haggard succeeded, to a limited extent, in converting the crisis in farming into a wider national question. Malcolm Chase noted that during the depression era, both technical writers and general rural subject matter enjoyed a degree of public profile, that disappeared in the years immediately following World War II. This prominence was overwhelmingly down to the centrality of the role of agriculture within contemporary debates on the future of the nation, both economic and social. M. Chase, This is no claptrap: this is our heritage, in C. Shaw and M. Chase (Eds) *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* (Manchester 1989) 128.

⁵P.A. Graham, *The Rural Exodus: The Problem of the Village and the Town* (London 1892) 201.

⁶Laing asserts a duality in any notion of reality that divides individual and collective thought. Thus an attempt to grasp a singular and thereby reducible depiction on depression proves theoretically flawed. Samuel and Thompson, assuming that a subjective reality exists, concur with the need to revisit source material to witness how they can yield important and equally valid evidence with regard the symbolic construction of reality, or more accurately, realities. S. Laing, Images of the Rural in Popular Culture 1750-1990, in B. Short (Ed) *The English Rural Community: Image and Analysis* (Cambridge 1992) 133; R. Samuel, and P. Thompson, Introduction, in R. Samuel and P. Thompson (Eds) *The Myths We Live By* (London 1990) 1-22.

⁷An obvious question to pose would query the motivation of offering a digestible account of rural destitution for an urban audience that only fantasised of returning to idyllic England. Fisher suggests that 'as a simple rural figure he [the farmer] could get sympathy over the bad weather and the pressures of his landlord: as a capitalist farmer he was either ignored or ridiculed'. Perhaps books such as Haggard's "Rural England" or F.E. Green's "The Awakening of England" aimed to confront the myth of the Picturesque. The famous Victorian agricultural expert, R.H. Rew implored that 'it is of the highest importance to agriculture as a whole that its position should not be misrepresented to the public'. Alternatively, the reformist nature of the texts perhaps indicated that the books were a tool to not only educate an urban-biased Parliament on the 'real' situation in 'Agrarian England', but to garner public support for farmers from overwhelming indifference. See Rew, *Op Cit.* J.R. Fisher, Public Opinion and Agriculture 1875-1900 (Unpubl PhD. thesis, University of Hull 1972) 6.

⁸These impacts were both extraneous and internal to the English agrarian system, typified by foreign imports for the former and rural depopulation and the perceived decline in the quality of labour for the latter case. A. Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England: A Social History 1850-1925* (London 1991) 3; J. Brown, *Agriculture in England - A Survey of Farming, 1870-1947* (Manchester 1987) 2; M. Olson and C.C. Harris, 'Free Trade in Corn': a statistical study of the prices and production of wheat in Great Britain from 1873 to 1896 *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 73 (1959) 145-168.

⁹Perren, *Agriculture in Depression, 1870-1940* 4; J.D. Chambers and G.E. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution 1750-1880* (London 1966); A.D.M. Phillips, *The Underdraining of Farmland in England During the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge 1989).

¹⁰H.E. Moore recorded 'a great number of cases' where farmers were unable to commit any capital, even, in the case of tenants where no rent had to be paid (or at least minimal rental following significant abatements), leading to a commonplace degradation of land into unproductive tumbledown. J.A.R. Marriott suggested the price collapse extinguished any sort of enterprise culture from amongst the farmers, who, as many testimonies show, accepted the later years of depression with inevitable resignation. H.E. Moore, *The Revival of Farming Contemporary Review* 65 (1894) 58-74; J.A.R. Marriott, *Modern England 1885-1945: A History of My Own Times* (London 1934) 35.

¹¹It would not be conjectural to suggest the physical degradation of the countryside may have further heightened the sense of failure and futility. As the Essex study in Chapter Two illustrates, there exists a plausible assertion that an unkempt countryside reflected the apathy of the later years of depression, with many farmers still unprepared to speculate their livelihood on new methods of cultivation. In nearby Suffolk, Haggard recorded one farmer's opinion that continued depression would provoke an evanescent of hedgerows, perhaps by the 1920s, choked to death by uncontrolled weeds, the result of the abandonment of centuries old techniques such as cutting thorns down to the roots. The appearance of rushes (*juncus*) in ditches signalled the neglect of drainage practices. The decline in the numbers working the land had been set in motion by the 1867 Gangs Act that outlawed the exploitation of child labour. To cut overheads, farmers also rationalised the female labour force, most notably in the roles of hand-weeders and stone pickers, as famously portrayed in the art of George Clausen. E.J.T. Collins, *Agriculture and Conservation in England: An Historical Overview, 1880-1939 Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 146 (1985) 38-46; Haggard, *A Farmer's Year*.

¹²R. Hill and P. Stamper, *The Working Countryside 1862-1945* (Shrewsbury 1993).

¹³Perry defines the High Farming era as a period from the 1840s to the 1870s, of high investment in the 'classical' methods of the eighteenth century, embracing the new technologies and vogue for scientific methods. Similarly James Caird, the famous agricultural commentator described the period as a 'general diffusion of a knowledge of good principles and practice'. P.J. Perry, *High Farming in Victorian Britain: the financial foundations Agricultural History* 52 (1978) 364-380; J. Caird, *General View of British Agriculture Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 14 (new series) (1878) 277-293.

¹⁴Perry, *British Farming in the Great Depression 1870-1940*. Walter Pearce in *The Times* suggested that between 1875 and 1904, the wheat acreage declined by 1.75 million acres, as grass was substituted for arable crops. W. Pearce, 'Some Agricultural Statistics' *The Times* 27 September 1905, col. a, 12. Hall offers a more recent assessment, concluding that between 1870 and 1900 land under grain crops declined by 40 per cent while permanent grass grew by one third. Caird produced similar estimates believing that for every acre of arable land lost, two acres of grassland replaced it. P. Hall, *England c1900* (Cambridge 1973); J. Caird, *The British Land Question Journal of the Statistical Society* 44 (1881) 629-643.

¹⁵C.S Orwin and E.H. Whetham, *Op Cit.*, 240-241.

¹⁶It is a commonly regarded fact that competition would have hit Britain even earlier but for a series of European wars as well as the American Civil War, that fortuitously suppressed production and immediate economic recovery.

¹⁷Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression (1897) Final Report Cd 8540.

¹⁸Interestingly the figures, collected mainly from agricultural returns produced by the Board of Agriculture, when accepted at face value, dispel one of the most famous of all myths with regard to the depression: that the area under cultivation diminished under protracted financial distress. Assuming Walter Pearce's statistics, as previously referenced are relatively accurate, then the area under arable crops actually recovered by nearly one quarter of a million acres by 1904. C. Taylor, *Fields in the English Landscape* (London 1975) 153.

¹⁹F. Capie and R. Perren, The British Market for Meat, 1850-1914 *Agricultural History* 54 (1980) 502-516.

²⁰E.J.T. Collins and E.L. Jones, Sectoral Advance in English Agriculture 1850-1880 *Agricultural History Review* 15 (1967) 65-82. Hall notes that a correlation between the heavier the soil, the heavier the depression. Hall, *Op Cit.*

²¹Brown suggests that between 1875 and 1882, rainfall figures were 14% above national annual levels. Crucially, he also claims that southern and eastern England also recorded the highest levels of excess rain. D. Smith's account of dairy farming during the depression in Essex quotes one farmer's reminiscence of the 1878 harvest, its devastation prompted by unseasonable weather. "...[it] marked the beginning of the worst period...rain fell day after day...and when at least the weather broke for a day or two, the farmers carted their corn still damp in a desperate bid to save some of it". D. Smith, *No Rain in These Clouds* (London 1943); Brown, *Op Cit.*

²²E.L. Jones, *Seasons and Prices: The Role of the Weather in English Agricultural History* (London 1964) 173.

²³Wilson Fox claimed that over 36,000 acres of estate land in Suffolk had been sold to *nouveau riche* business men. A. Wilson Fox, Assistant Commissioner's Report into the County of Suffolk. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression (1894) Cd 7755.

²⁴B. English, On the eve of the Great Depression: the economy of Stedmere estate 1869-1878 *Business History* 24 (1982) 24-47.

²⁵R. Perren, *Agriculture in Depression, 1870-1940* 4.

²⁶Altick's suggestion that the depression seriously undermined the power structures of the landed elite approximates to the work of F.M.L. Thompson. However, the process is infinitely more complex. The empowerment of the labouring classes through the introduction of the working class vote for men offered an equally potent attack on established social relations. R.D. Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas* (London 1973); F.M.L. Thompson, *Op Cit.*

²⁷H.A. Clemenson, *English Country Houses and Landed Estates* (London 1982).

²⁸Michael Turner supports such an assertion, believing that the subject is 'hardly a fresh topic' in an econometric form. The problem with such an approach, Alun Howkins amongst others identifies, is that other potential sources and reconceptualisations are subordinated by an obsession with economic objectification. M.E. Turner, Book Review of Richard Perren (1995) 'Agriculture in Depression, 1870-1940' *Agricultural History Review* 44 (1996) 247; A. Howkins, Deserters From the Plough *History Today* 43 (1993) 32-38. Perren, *Agriculture in Depression, 1870-1940* 19; R. Perren, The Landlord and Agricultural Transformation, 1870-1914 *Agricultural History Review* 18 (1970) 36-51; J.T. Coppock, The Changing Face of England, 1850-c1900, in H.C. Darby (Ed), *A New Historical Geography of England* (Cambridge 1973).

²⁹Richmond Commission 1879-1882. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression 1894-97.

³⁰Ó Gráda's conclusion concurs with the assessment of the second Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression that landowners suffered the heaviest reductions in income of nearly thirty per cent. C. Ó Gráda, Agricultural Decline 1860-1914, in R. Floud and D. McCloskey (Eds), *The Economic History of Britain Since the 1700's* (Vol. II) (Cambridge 1981) 175-197.

³¹M.E. Turner, Output and Prices in UK Agriculture, 1867-1914, and the Great Agricultural Depression Reconsidered *Agricultural History Review* 40 (1992) 38-51.

³²In assessing the fortunes of the different branches of British farming in the nineteenth century, historians have had to rely on the trends in prices collected mainly in urban areas for products often much altered from those sold by farmers'. E.H. Whetham, Livestock Prices in Britain, 1851-93 *Agricultural History Review* 11 (1962) 27-36.

³³The idea of a *great depression* proves somewhat unstable. Lawes and Gilbert first suggested in the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* of 1880 that agriculture had suffered a transition from an era of 'great prosperity to one of great depression'. S.B. Saul declared that 'the sooner the "great depression" is banished from the literature, the better'. 'Greatness' inspires notions of universal distress. Yet Fletcher proclaims that a strict differentiation between arable farmers, the predominant practice of the south and east of England and livestock farmers has to be exercised. By creating a dichotomy, generalist assumptions about the economic nature of the depression cannot be substantiated. See J.B. Lawes and J.H. Gilbert, *Our Climate and Our Wheat Crops* *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 16 (new series) (1880) 173; S.B. Saul, *Op Cit.* 55; F. Bédarida, *A Social History of England 1851-1990* (London 1990) 99. Fletcher, *Op Cit.*

³⁴The notional basis for this statement is also applicable to the statistical data I draw upon, and the contemporary debates that surrounded the evidence for a supposed rural racial degeneration. General statistics, typically wheat price indexes, are employed that ignore locational factors, though if they can be assumed as national averages reveal a halving of crop values from 54s 7d in 1858-59 to a nadir of 26s 8d in 1874-75.

³⁵G.A. Jamieson, *The Present Agricultural and Financial Depression* (Edinburgh 1885) 10.

³⁶The highest estimate was registered at 92s 7lb, the lowest 57s 2lb. Richards described the situation as 'unsatisfactory'. Richards, W. (1893) "Agricultural Distress", 5-10.

³⁷F.M.L. Thompson, 212-214.

³⁸Contemporary accounts and governmental reports do not, despite the nineteenth century vogue for the representation of 'truth', offer an authentic portrayal of suffering, merely conveying the disparity of meanings and their ultimate utilization by both the farming community and the general public.

³⁹Short attests to the peculiar cultural trait that enables the countryside to sustain dualistic ideological interpretations that can be both communistic through to aristocratic. J.R. Short, *Op Cit.* 32.

⁴⁰The author produced a series of maps delineating reported cases of farm bankruptcy. Perry, 'Where was the Great Depression in Agriculture?' *a geography of bankruptcy in late Victorian England and Wales*.

⁴¹In addition to a series of bad harvests that afflicted southern arable producers, *The Times* of 1881 reported that 'a heavy plague has fallen upon farmers in the shape of liver rot in sheep', destroying the profits of mixed farmers. F.A. Channing, *The Truth About Agricultural Depression: an economic study of the evidence of the Royal Commission* (London 1897) 3; *The Times* 'The Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression' 10 October 1881, col. a, 4.

⁴²Perren suggests a flaw with the maps is that they do not allow for 'individuals in difficulty who made some sort of private arrangement with their creditors'. Perren, *Agriculture in Depression, 1870-1940* 20.

⁴³Farmers were criticised for apparent extravagance. A straitening of circumstances could quite equally mean poverty or merely the removal of frivolities.

⁴⁴However, a denial of distress does not discount the justifiably secretive nature of the farming community and an unwillingness to yield competitive advantage to foreign farmers by revealing financial accounts. R.H. Rew, the famous agricultural expert, noted that 'farmers are sometimes apt to complain that they are expected to wear their hearts on their sleeves for daws to peck at'. R.H. Rew, *Farm Revenue and Capital* *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 6 (3rd series) (1895) 30-47.

⁴⁵The reasons for this process are fairly straightforward. Firstly, southern harvests were blighted by weather conditions that impinged directly rather than incidentally on the final product output from the farm. Secondly, farmers in the south may have developed a culture of depression in which the arable industry was seen as moribund, thus cultivating a further sense of the futility of farming.

⁴⁶J. Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914* (London 1993)vii.

⁴⁷Samuel and Thompson argue that historians need to overcome the 'crude weighing of 'myth' against 'reality' because each concept is inherently more complex than supposed. R. Samuel and P. Thompson (Ed), *The Myths We Live By* (London 1990) 1 and 14.

⁴⁸Perry concedes that though the Assistant Commissioners of both the Richmond Commission and the second Royal Commission may well have been agricultural experts that kept their politics hidden, both committees were plagued with political posturing. The 'dangers' of attempting to establish an authoritative reading of depression from the Royal Commissions is that the biases are implied or very discretely asserted. With the numerous books and pamphlets published on depression and referred to throughout this thesis, the prejudices and intentions are often explicitly laid out at the start, typically by membership of a particular organisation of an author. For example Fredrick Verinder's schemes, referenced in Chapter Four, for land reform as a solution to depression arose through his work for the United Committee on the Taxation of Land Values. P.J. Perry (1974), *Op Cit.* 171.

⁴⁹The authors and their ideas are introduced and repeated at appropriate junctures throughout the thesis, where they can be discussed more fully.

⁵⁰M.J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (Cambridge 1981); A. Howkins (1991), *Op Cit.*

⁵¹J. Herf, *Reactionary Modernism* (Cambridge 1984); G. Bennett, *Folklore Studies and the English Rural Myth Rural History* 4 (1993) 77-91.

⁵²Both concepts have been explored thoroughly by Howkins. Rather than regurgitate these ideas, my aim is to develop an explicitly agrarian component within an understanding of how both cultural processes arose. 'The cultural history of England had to be rewritten [in the face of late-Victorian upheavals] and a new Englishness discovered which accorded with changed perceptions of society. This is *not* to postulate a crude economic determinism, rather to suggest that as economic and social change occurred, hand in hand with it, and to some degree influencing it, went a reworking of cultural forms which equally determined the eventuation of change'. A. Howkins, *The Discovery of Rural England* in R. Colls and P. Dodds (Eds) *Englishness, Politics and Culture 1880-1920* (London 1986) 69.

⁵³B. Short, *Images and Realities in the English Rural Community: an introduction* in B. Short (Ed) *The English Rural Community: Image and Analysis* (Cambridge 1992) 12.

⁵⁴The labouring voice was almost completely absent. No labourers were called before either Royal Commissions.

⁵⁵N. Koning, *Op Cit.*

⁵⁶The rediscovery of non-empirical evidence, Pringle contests, creates 'new source materials'. T.R. Pringle, *Prophet of the Highlands: Sir Edwin Landseer and the Scottish Highland Image* (Unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, Loughborough University of Technology 1988) 1.

⁵⁷P. Cloke; M. Doel; D. Matless; M. Phillips and N. Thrift (Eds) *Writing the Rural - Five Cultural Geographies* (London 1994). Extending the intellectual debate initiated by this publication a session entitled "Theoretical Developments in Rural Geography: concepts and methods" was convened at the 1996 Institute of British Geographers Conference at Strathclyde University. Overwhelmingly the need for cultural theory was recognised to re-vitalise increasingly stale rural geographic debate.

⁵⁸A.H.R. Baker, *Historical Geography: a new beginning?* *Progress in Human Geography* 3 (1979) 560-571.

⁵⁹Cosgrove and Daniels offer a similar definition suggesting landscapes can be read as 'a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings'. B. Short, *Op Cit.* Daniels and Cosgrove, *Op Cit.* 1.

⁶⁰J.S. Duncan and N.G. Duncan, (Re)reading the landscape *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 6 (1988) 117-126.

⁶¹S. Daniels, *Envisioning England Journal of Historical Geography* 17 (1991) 95-99.

⁶²'The English landscape, as much as any other, mirrors a long succession of...idealised images and visual prejudices'. The origins of Pastoral identification go back much further to classical times. Lowenthal and Prince *Op Cit*.

⁶³Duncan and Duncan assert that landscapes can be seen as transformations of social and political ideologies into a physical form, reflecting 'the dominant value system'. Duncan and Duncan, (Re)reading the landscape *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 6 (1988) 117-126.

⁶⁴Such geographic propositions correspond with histories on power, landscape and representation in England such as the work of David Cannadine. D. Cannadine, *Aspects of Aristocracy: Grandeur and Decline in Modern Britain* (London 1994).

⁶⁵Criticisms were not without justification as farmers had persistently denied accountability for their own failings by attaching blame to extraneous factors such as the weather and foreign competition, implying that many within the farming community had not faced the reality of the arrival of a modern global agrarian market, anticipating the threat to be a short term danger. Nevertheless, the role of urban markets did seriously undermine the farmer's position by importing cheaper foreign goods. Farmers faced unfair tariffs from the railway companies for the transport of food to urban markets that, foreign produce avoided. Thus the price for home produced good was undermine by urban interests.

⁶⁶Though a largely disparate body of Radicals from the Liberal side of the house, Collings in particular, became closely associated with the political manoeuvring of Joseph Chamberlain.

⁶⁷Derek Gregory asserts that the behaviour of ideologies in space forms part of a discursive triangle constructed from power, knowledge and spatiality. As in the promotion of custodian values and their inscription in the landscape reflect, the exercise of power may have been symbolic rather than actual or material. D. Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Oxford 1994) 63.

⁶⁸S. Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Cambridge, Mass. 1983).

⁶⁹The term 'lived experience' is suggested by David Crouch. The future reformed landscape is envisioned as a productive space, and it here that notions of utility and beauty through work are explicitly connected. Land reform challenged the romantic assumptions of a benign, passively managed countryside that typified the landlord/farmer/labourer tripartite. D. Crouch, *British Allotments - Landscapes of Ordinary People Landscape* 31 (1992) 1-8.

⁷⁰P. Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (London 1992) 26.

⁷¹Objective distance becomes twice removed. Firstly, the contemporary authors used as source material displayed their own biases and subtle agendas. Secondly, the historian adds a further layer of meaning through the process of research and inscription.

⁷²Rider Haggard's contribution to late-Victorian reconceptualisations of the countryside are dealt with in Chapter Three.

⁷³Channing took a diametrically opposed view to substantial sections of the Final Majority Report.

⁷⁴'For most geographers today the issue of communication is one of writing, since writing has become the single most important form of communicating geographical understanding'. D. Cosgrove and M. Domosh, *Author and Authority: Writing the new cultural geography* (1990) 25.

⁷⁵This thesis concurs with Pile's judgement that simple notions of truth have to be discarded. S. Pile, *Practicing Interpretative Geography Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 16 (1991) 458-469; J.S. Duncan, *Landscapes of the self/landscapes of the other(s): cultural geography 1991-92 Progress in Human Geography* 17 367-377.

⁷⁶The implication here is an obvious one. The depth, or alternatively, richness of any study is dependent to an extent upon the amount and variety of research. Thus, in addition to revisiting sources familiar to students of the agrarian depression, I have also encompassed essays and books specifically on the subject plus a substantial number of texts on related matter such as the rural population crisis, land reform and the introduction of technology onto the farm, in an attempt to broaden the traditionally constricted representations of depression.

⁷⁷It could be argued that the thesis could have possibly concentrated upon local debates on the failure of agriculture. Naturally enough there exists an enormous collection of evidence within local archives, most of which I was unable to touch through research constraints. Nevertheless, to understand the local material more comprehensively, would require reference to the national debates and the filtering down of information.

⁷⁸'Negative' in this respect relates to the portrayal of the countryside as everything the city is not. For example the countryside was perceived not to be immoral, not polluted and not physically degenerative. In a sense this dichotomy is located within a stereotypical geography of purity. In an idealised Pastoral form this negativity represented a reverential quality. Lynda Nead notes the apparent polarity between urban and rural England that saw the countryside defined in antipodal terms to the city. John Rennie Short similarly claims that 'as myth, the countryside has always been a[n urban] counterpoint'. L. Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian England* (Oxford 1988) 39; J.R. Short, *Imagined Country: Environment, Culture and Society* (London 1991) 31; T. Ploszajska, Moral Landscapes and Manipulated Spaces: gender, class and space in Victorian Reformatory Schools *Journal of Historical Geography* 20 (1994) 413-429; B. Short, Images and Realities in the English Rural Community: an introduction, in B. Short (Ed) *The English Rural Community: Image and Analysis* (Cambridge 1992) 2.

⁷⁹A. Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England: A Social History 1850-1925* (London 1991) 1. Of interest is establishing how depression became bound up in or actually initiated debates on the territorialization of space and the search for national identity, and overwhelmingly in the literature of this period the national identity in question was English. Amongst Victorian agricultural literary texts there is a clear sense of Celtic farming as the Other. Indeed, within some of the Condition of Rural England texts under review in Chapter Three, this 'Otherness' extends to the northern counties of England.

⁸⁰Geology determined the underlying soil type that in turn shaped production methods.

⁸¹Both F.M.L. Thompson and Bethanie Afton have separately argued for greater attention to local farming responses to formulate a geographically sensitive reading of depression, moving away from essentialist prescription of distress, building on the earlier revisionist work of T. W Fletcher. In effect one hopes to achieve a greater understanding of how place, and more importantly spatial distance transformed social ideas and how these in turn transformed both imaginary and material space. F.M.L. Thompson, An anatomy of English agriculture, 1700-1920, in B.A. Holderness and M. Turner (Eds), *Land, Labour and Agriculture, 1700-1920* (London 1991) 211; B. Afton, The Great Agricultural Depression on the English Chalklands: The Hampshire Experience *Agricultural History Review* 44 (1996) 191-205; Fletcher *Op Cit*.

⁸²The term "countryside" is equally problematic possessing as it does idyllic overtones. Indeed, as noted in Phillip Lowe's essay 'The Rural Idyll Defended', John Betjeman suggested that the term disclosed a 'delightful suburbanism'. P. Lowe, The Rural Idyll Defended: from preservation to conservation, in G. Mingay (Ed) *The Rural Idyll* (London 1989).

⁸³The thesis intends to not only unravel the complexity of meaning that envelopes the agricultural depression, but to also partake in a Barthesian interest in 'the production of meaning in the process of reading', understanding how these messages were interpreted and codified by the general public. See D. Lodge, *Modern Criticism and Theory: a Reader* (London 1988) 167.

⁸⁴Perry's 'four directions for amplification' prove a useful conceptual starting point, critically directing the thesis into areas for further consideration: time, space, perception and participation. See Perry, *Agriculture in Depression, 1870-1940*.

⁸⁵The enormous flexibility of meanings with regard to the agricultural depression is in part the product of spatial variance, developing the need for a cultural geographic critique further.

⁸⁶Chapter Three discusses the leitmotifs of failure in greater depth by uncovering the role of a number of writers who were sympathetic to the rural cause, often because they were farmers themselves. In the case of the classic author from the genre, Rider Haggard, accusations of 'hobby' farming plagued his work. Despite rustic backgrounds, Ruralist writers were possessive of enough urban sensibilities to couch their reports from the decaying countryside in language and imagery that reflected the popularity for bucolic tastes.

⁸⁷Initially, the thesis considered three counties, Shropshire, Leicestershire and Essex. Essex, most obviously was the classically depressed county. Leicestershire offered a good account of the collapse of mixed farming as well as highlighted the subtle differences of farming fortunes imposed by the underlying soil-type. Shropshire presented a case study in which the sharp upland/lowland divide would produce differing outcomes.

⁸⁸This theme will be referred to repeatedly in Chapter Two and Three.

⁸⁹Despite publication of essays as early as 1879, this additional veneer of meaning did not emerge until the 1890s, two decades after initial farm losses were recorded.

⁹⁰It was no coincidence, reformers argued, that the depression impacted relentlessly in the areas where landowners predominated.

⁹¹Samuel and Thompson suggest '...the potential value of a more sensitive approach to myth by historians lies above all in raising new questions: some of them deeply challenging'. Christiana Payne contends that an element of myth infiltrated nineteenth century attitudes towards the countryside, particularly through a romantic idealisation of agrarian processes, an issue vital in understanding the meanings of farm failure received by the general population. Alternatively, from an agrarian perspective, farming writers were in the words of P.J. Perry prone to 'exaggeration'. Samuel and Thompson, *Op Cit.* 5; C. Payne, *Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England, 1780-1890* (London 1993) 1. B. Short, *Op Cit.* 15; Perry, *British Farming in the Great Depression 1870-1914* 60.

⁹²Matless warns the mythologising process, particularly in its Pastoral idealised form should not be dismissed as falsehood. The derogative treatment of myths by historians and geographers fails to recognise a potential allegorical value, not least because they perform a proactive role in belief systems, even to the extent, as the farming community demonstrated during the late nineteenth century depression, of influencing physical actions. D. Matless, *Doing the English Village 1945-1990: An Essay in Imaginative Geography*, in P. Cloke; M. Doel; D. Matless; M. Phillips and N. Thrift (Eds) *Writing the Rural - Five Cultural Geographies* (London 1994) 7.

⁹³By stripping away layers of myths and assumptions a 'real' depression will not emerge. Reality remains elusive and therefore its pursuance becomes a futile exercise in attempting to expose such a materialization. What such an approach does confirm is a plurality of meaning interacting on a series of different levels. Lodge, *Op Cit.* 167.

⁹⁴P. Cloke and N. Thrift, *Refiguring the 'Rural'*, in P. Cloke; M. Doel; D. Matless; M. Phillips and N. Thrift (Eds) *Writing the Rural - Five Cultural Geographies* (London 1994) 3.

⁹⁵During the era of depression, threats to symbolic landscapes held in national regard were posed by the decay of agriculture and not necessarily urban development. The fortunes of 'Constable Country' proved especially pertinent. The River Stour in Suffolk was no longer commercially viable as local farmland reverted to tumbledown and Flatford Mill stood derelict. The Victorian fears now assume an ironic feel in that the post-war success of modern-day agriculture with associated modification of habitats present an equally harmful challenge to cherished landscapes. M. Shoard, *This Land is Our Land* (London 1987).

⁹⁶Masterman, most notably sensed the directional crux that now faced the nation, and the upheavals in agriculture could not be dismissed as a short term temporary blip. "Yet it is change - obscure change in economic conditions, in aspirations, in faith, in energies or lassitudes - which is responsible for the rise and fall of nations". C.F.G. Masterman, *Realities at Home*, in C.F.G. Masterman (Ed) *The Heart of the Empire* (London 1901); C.F.G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* (London 1909) 10; G.K. Chesterton, *The Patriotic Idea*, in L. Oldenshaw (Ed) *England: A Nation* (London 1904).

⁹⁷C. Williams and A.D. Smith, The National Construction of Social Space *Progress in Human Geography* 7 (1983) 502-518.

⁹⁸H.R. Haggard, *A Farmer's Year* (London 1899); H.R. Haggard, *Rural England* (London 1902); W.E. Cooper, *The Murder of Agriculture: A National Peril* (Letchworth 1908); F.E. Green, *The Awakening of England* (London 1912); J. Collings, *The Colonization of Rural Britain: A Complete Scheme for the Regeneration of British Rural Life* (London 1914).

⁹⁹Victorians developed a Pastoralism, manifest in the back to the land movement that elevated preservation to premium importance. J. Marsh, *Back to the Land - the Pastoral Impulse in England, from 1880-1914* (London 1982).

¹⁰⁰A degree of caution has to be exercised in such statements. It would be misleading to portray the period as one of abject despondency. As Dyhouse suggests, the 'decline in the mood of national optimism' was more subtle than a temporal growth in fatalism. By proposing the depression can be read as a state of mind, I am addressing other issues such as myth-making and the motivating factors behind the resolutions to rescue agriculture. C. Dyhouse, *The Condition of England 1860-1900* (London 1978) 70.

¹⁰¹Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England: A Social History 1850-1925* 5.

¹⁰²Even the dates of the economic downturn lend weight to an argument that the depression possessed an inherent cultural depth. The accepted starting date of 1875 through to World War I coincided with the period of greatest resistance to modernist ideas on social order, technology and the circulation of capital.

¹⁰³W. Laqueur, *Fin-de Siècle: once more with feeling* *Journal of Contemporary History* 31 (1996) 5-49.

¹⁰⁴As Cosgrove and Daniels suggest, texts and by that we can mean paintings, poetry, verbal descriptions and prose, do not faithfully re-produce an image free-standing from the object depicted, but act as 'constituent images of its meaning or meanings'. Similarly, Barnes and Duncan propose that texts are 'constitutive of reality rather than mimicking it'. D. Cosgrove and S. Daniels (Eds) *The Iconography of Landscape* (Cambridge 1988) 1; T. Barnes and J. Duncan (Eds) *Writing Worlds* (London 1992).

¹⁰⁵The Richmond Commission was appointed in 1879 to investigate the extent of the 'depressed condition of the agricultural interest', its causes and the exact role that legislation could enact as a remedy. The commission had been set up following growing discomfort since the mid-1870's and therefore should not be interpreted as a knee-jerk reaction to the wretched year of 1879. Indeed, its appointment in August would have pre-empted the disastrous harvests of that year. Anon., *British Agriculture in the Nineteenth Century* *Quarterly Review* 193 (1901) 338-359.

¹⁰⁶D. Lowenthal and H.C. Prince, *English Landscape Tastes* *Geographical Review* 55 (1965) 186-222; N. Yates, *Pugin and the Medieval Dream* *History Today* 37.9 (1987) 33-41.

¹⁰⁷R. Mayhew, *Contextualizing Practice in Intellectual History* *Journal of Historical Geography* 20 (1994) 323-328; S. Daniels, *Fields of Vision* (London 1993).

¹⁰⁸However, the cultural component in Collings's thinking should not be overplayed. It would be incorrect to suggest that Collings was in any way part of what Eder termed the 'bourgeois fugitive movement', a *fin de siècle* return to Romantic conceptions of a past, and thereby more pleasant rural existence. The theoretical background to Collings's 'back to the land' plan will be addressed in Chapter Four. K. Eder, *The Rise of Counter-Culture Movements Against Modernity: Nature as a New Field of Class Struggle* *Theory, Culture and Society* 7 (1990) 21-47; U. Eco, *Travels in Hyper-Reality* (London 1986) 68-72.

¹⁰⁹The piecemeal approach employed by Collings and his acolytes appealed to the rich vein of local memory, or what Peter Bishop terms 'deep experience/deep memory' situated in individual places to generate indigenous support. Collings's Rural Labourers' League favoured the creation of district small holding and allotment associations to embrace parochial geographies. The enclosure movement had not been a single uniform revolution and for many villages, even in the most heavily dominated areas of southern England, the conversion of land was a 'recent' event within the near, and therefore recollectable, past. P. Bishop, *Residence on Earth: anima mundi and a sense of geographical 'belonging'* *Ecumene* 1 (1994).

¹¹⁰Barthes argued myths play a vital role in depoliticizing the subject by 'innocenting' the meaning, thus the English rural idyll is invested with qualities of virtuousness. However, in late Victorian England there was a clear attempt by political ideologies of all hues to reclaim the bucolic lifestyle as rightfully their own. Fforde noted that by the Edwardian era, '...it was really the farm workers who were the chief objects of party political attention'. Indeed patriotic celebrations of the rural past were far from the preserve of the Right. It is a disenchantment with this political *mêlée* that gives rise to the Ruralist movement, a pseudo one-issue agenda that aimed to assert the centrality of rural life in English identity while simultaneously promoting specifically rural issues, which obviously during this period revolved around the depression in agriculture. M. Fforde, *The Conservative Party and Real Property in England, 1900-1914* (Unpubl. D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford 1985) 282.

¹¹¹Naturally a more nuanced view would suggest some of the more agrarian rather than aesthetic schemes embraced all three facets of reform. Certainly the work of Jesse Collings, which forms the basis of Chapter 4 supports such a contention.

¹¹²'Landscape meaning is duplicitous in that, within England for instance, it has provided social legislation for various conflicting groups'. P. Gruffudd, *Landscape and Nationhood: Tradition and Modernity in Rural Wales, 1900-1950* (Unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, University of Loughborough 1989) 8.

¹¹³Patrick Wright suggests that within the chaos and disorder that contextualised the cultural background to the agrarian depression, the need for the 'security' of tradition became 'alluring'. In a sense, the land owning class tapped into this sentiment. P. Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: the national past in contemporary Britain* (London 1985) 22.

¹¹⁴Cultural hegemony refers to the appropriation of cultural ideas and symbolic forms by existing power structures, usually to serve their own interests. Starting from this theoretical standpoint, I am obviously suggesting that the notional rural idyll, the reference points of which infiltrated the highest levels of the decision making process acted as a conduit for landlordist apologism. Therefore the harsh questions the depression posed, particularly with regard to high rents, lack of investment and general social responsibility, a requirement, though one not especially appreciated within the existing social framework of the closed village, needed to be controlled, suppressed or fashioned to protect established interests. P. Shurmer-Smith and K. Hannam, *Worlds of Desire - Realms of Power: A Cultural Geography* (London 1994) 4.

¹¹⁵Perren references the revisionist work of T.W Fletcher for this challenge on the established notions of depression. Ernle's work had assumed status of an 'official history' of the depression. Perren, *Agriculture in Depression, 1870-1940* 11-12; Fletcher, *Op Cit.*; R. Prothero (Lord Ernle), *English Farming Past and Present* (London 1912).

¹¹⁶Based on the number of column inches, small holdings represented the most discussed agricultural issue of the day.

**Towards a Reconceptualisation of the 'Great Agricultural
Depression', 1879-1914**

Section One

Towards a Re-Conceptualisation of the 'Great Agricultural Depression', 1879-1914

The storm is over, but the agricultural wrecks (already alarming in number) bestrew our lands - though not all, for many years have yet to come.

J.J. Mechi (1880) Letter to the Editor, *The Times*

Introduction

Employing the maxim that agrarian depression represented a multitude of meanings as a central proposition, any deconstruction of the subject must attempt to comprehend the origins of its symbolic formulation, in other words, establish the parameters of distress and who defined them. To attribute the symptoms of late-Victorian farm failure to a time-lag following anti-Protectionist legislation of the 1840s restricts the historical study of the phenomenon to just one economic aspect of distress.¹ William Cooper as early as 1908 rejected the dominance of financial discourses at the expense of broader, more socially informed debate, an ironic position considering the econometric dominance of subsequent historical research.

...we have listened to the false doctrine of bad or fervid, but wrong-headed, zealots, who were only capable of looking at a great fiscal question from one point of view, instead of studying it from many sides which so broad a question always presents.²

Late-nineteenth-century agricultural depression embraced a discourse on politics, nationhood, *fin de siècle* anxiety and a dialectic between social justice and the incompatibility of industrial modernism, violating established semi-feudal rural orders. For most farmers depression signified much more, such as the struggle for financial existence. It is the reading of depression by farmers and the subsequent construction of a number of myths that are of interest to this chapter.

Koning interprets the depression from an historical position as a failure of agrarian capitalism and the ineptitude of British farmers in adjusting to foreign opposition in competitive markets.³ However, the farming industry attempted to deflect captious comment by attributing causality for depression upon a host of factors other than financial mismanagement, consequently inciting accusations of ignorance, arrogance, complacency and petty parochialism. The depression exposed rural resistance to change, both conscious and otherwise, in the face of modernisation. Naturally, following thirty years of unprecedented success, the so-called 'Golden Age of High Farming', agriculturalists were unwilling to modify methods and techniques.

Yet frequently this 'resistance' was enacted on behalf of the countryside by urban dwellers and those who enjoyed the countryside for its poetic worth, its sense of stasis in a rapidly changing world, confusing the origins of 'real' rural opinion.⁴ Even contributors to a literary rural realism movement such as Rider Haggard, conformed to generic Urbanist stereotypes, urging salvation of a lost bucolic past.⁵

Central to any reconceptualisation of agrarian depression is the establishment of an apparent, but not 'definitive' geography. Geography in this instance presents a clear duality. On one level, by asking a series of different questions from previous historical studies, a reconfiguration of the occurrence of depression both in *real* and *imaginary* terms is urged. This agrees with T.W. Fletcher's pronouncement of a north/south divide defined by the depth of distress, but tentatively suggesting a series of cultural factors may have impinged upon a *perceived* rather than 'real' geography of depression.⁶ However, by accepting depression as a mythical or ethereal construction as well as an economic reality, financial malaise cannot be mapped objectively in 'real' space. The outbreak of depression coincided with areas of sentimental value or symbolic significance within a revitalised sense of nationhood, namely southern England.⁷ As this chapter reveals, identification of failure becomes enveloped in myth, typified by the skewed materialization of depression in Essex. Essex emerged as a microcosm of wider national failure, a barometer for the inconstant degrees of depression. Yet a re-interpretation of this most gloomy period in Essex farming history discloses the depression was not uniform across the county, nor was the depth of distress as grave as popularly conceived. However, this geography is assembled at a national-level beyond the conception of the typical farmers. Indeed, in the absence of any contemporary statement regarding the mythological tendency in the construction depression, this aspect of a geography of depression represents an historical reconstruction.

If description of economic fortunes in space, either objective or abstract, assumes one facet to geography, the other half of the duality seeks to understand how location in space defined behaviour, which explores the localised and individual geographies of farmers. In one sense, geography impinges upon rural affairs by the disruptive role of space in the communication of knowledge, in this case the dissemination of information on agrarian depression. Using Essex and other examples, individual interpretations and the collective opinion of the farming community can be gauged and behaviour contextualised within localised knowledge structures. Physical geography in association with economic factors also determined behavioural responses to distress. Occurrence of depression upon certain soils influenced the physical mapping of failure onto select environments. For example, the presence of depression on the high maintenance heavy clays of southern and eastern England enforced a conversion to pasture to confront falling prices.⁸ Somewhat

problematically, inadequately drained heavy clays proved unacceptable to 'grassing down', reducing pasture land to poor quality grazing, despite the relative success of grassland agriculture on clays in eastern Leicestershire.⁹ Thus spatial location determined the nature and extent of depression which subsequently determined farming actions, the inappropriate responses actually accentuating the effects of failure.

The geographically determined reaction to the enforced reconstitution of rural England varied between the passionate aesthetics of urban fantasists and farming pragmatism. But an assumption that depression prompted an epochal change to English landscape traditions succumbs to the myth of a changeless countryside prior to depression. The principles of rustic romanticism denoted an immutability of landscape but the working countryside in reality proved contrary. Transformation was not revolutionary, primarily because four decades of depression elapsed. Shifts in the fortunes of agriculture were relatively commonplace. Certainly post-World War II mutations have proven more consequential. Whether change was succession or radical, the depressed landscape depicted in rural texts ironically confirmed the cherished 'timelessness' of the English countryside was not in its iconic southern heartland, but most evident in northern England.

Rather than divulge discrepancies between economic facts and a real geography of depression, this chapter attempts to comprehend contemporary readings of failure by concentrating on the evolution of depression in its abstract form. To establish how notions of depression emerged, the initial focus examines individual and then collective farming perspectives revealing the significance Victorian farmers drew from changing economic circumstances. Functionalist farming perspectives were veiled by a subsequent appropriation at national level and developed into mediations of a series of other cultural themes that consumed Victorian society, forming the basis of study for Chapter Three. Farming opinion, both at a personal and community level was derived from experience supplemented by accounts and comments published in local, national and technical print media. Competing ideas and biases of representation at work in the British press therefore need to be deciphered. Crucial in all these discussions is interpreting the role landowning elites played in both layers, individual and collective, at which the depression was conceived, asserting that interpretations of depression were innocently and consciously distorted by the political motivations of a patriarchal order under threat. Finally, to understand these propositions a study of the depression in Essex is undertaken by way of an example.

Chapter Two: Reading the Depression as a Text

2.1 *The Individual Farming Perspective*

Throughout the agricultural depression, innumerable readings of failure were held, modified and dispensed with. The content of various significations of failure as read by farmers, the factors they considered contributed to depression and how national cognition of failure published in newspapers, books and journals determined localised behaviour remains unclear. A specifically *agrarian* conceptual understanding of depression failed to concur with a linear path of symptom, prognosis and remedy, accumulating instead a series of inner contradictions reflective of the simultaneous bullishness and fragility of English farmers. In common with eclectic theories of the age such as the degeneracy concept, readings of depression combined scientific rationale with economic ideas, natural explanations such as the irregular seasonality of the weather through to the indubitably superstitious, supported by a mixture of published fact, hearsay, myth and observation. In truth no interpretations were either correct or erroneous. However, some readings were more accurate than others. J.J. Mechi's prediction, for example, at the start of 1880 that the previous year witnessed the culmination of the depression proved spectacularly wide of the mark.¹⁰ This chapter division will therefore, consider three broad categories into which farmers attempted to decipher depression: natural, economic and extraneous explanations. To achieve this aim, one must conceive of how these explanations fitted into a psychology of depression, alternatively the state of mind of the farmer. An inability by farmers to understand the interaction between these three categories undoubtedly retarded farming resolutions and impacted directly upon physical manifestations of depression. Most obviously the origins of tumbledown or abandoned land were confused by natural and economic factors. Nowhere in any farming literature is a definitive comprehension of tumbledown stated, though its presence and meaning was more clearly conceived.

2.1.1 Depression as a State of Mind

Agricultural depression, it could be suggested literally translated as melancholia or a form of psychosis. Russell Davies discovered the number of rural dwellers committed to local mental asylums in south-west Wales increased as a direct result of financial pressures during the depression.¹¹ F.J. Coverdale, the land agent to Lord Petre, the Essex patriarch, believed the death of a tenant had been accelerated by the 'anxiety of his position'.¹² Though similar work has not been undertaken in England or Scotland, the result could prove interesting, especially in areas perceived to have been hit heavier than Pembrokeshire. The supposition that depression really was in the mind of the farmer was propounded by people such as W.H. Mallock, who was convinced the decline of British agriculture was in economic terms, illusory.¹³ Moving away from

extreme cases of illness, the assertion of a depressed farming psyche is divisible into three components: collective mindset, fatalism and apathy, all constitutive of a *fin de siècle* fear of the future.

Firstly, by ascertaining explanations for depression a common farming mindset plagued by belligerence, defensiveness and irresolution is uncovered. This betrayed an apparent insecurity that concurred with a wider national crisis of direction.¹⁴ Farmers, or more precisely landowners in this instance initially attempted to defuse the impact of depression, a conspiracy evident to John Algernon Clarke writing in *The Times*. 'The attempt made by your correspondent "A Peer", to minimise the effect of your article on [the extent of] depression is not at all successful'.¹⁵ Contradictions characteristic of farming neurosis also revealed a similar doomed immovability. At the initial onset of depression towards the end of the 1870s, farmers with unquestioned rigidity attributed their financial plight to the weather, a blip that by the laws of nature represented no more than a temporary phenomenon. One could conclude farmers did not consider the initial downturn in profits a depression, an appraisal later made with hindsight. There is a degree of truth in the ascribing of natural causal factors to a recorded drop in prices. However, verbal and written responses to growing unprofitability perhaps reveal an obscured reality. Rather tellingly, farmers solicited long term solutions such as a return to Protection or relief on tax burdens, divulging a lack of confidence in their own diagnoses. With typical conceit, agriculturalists placed great faith in a 'grand solution' that would in the words of Brette D. Brette, settle 'once and for all' the national peril posed by depression, a suitably impressive public flourish for the national pre-eminent industry.¹⁶ Unwilling to take responsibility for any future action, farmers generally rejected self-help in favour of legislative action. By placing its fate in the hands of Parliament, the farming industry aimed to reinforce its lasting importance within the mechanisms of the national economy, inferring that its eminence merited Governmental protection.¹⁷ Templar noted the faith placed upon the Richmond Commission to 'show them [the farmers] some royal road to put more money into their pockets than they have done of late'.¹⁸ Agrarian reliance on Parliamentary assistance proved misplaced when confronted with political indifference. Farmers sought 'heroic remedies' but as George Broderick noted, the first Royal Commission failed to deliver an 'authoritative and decisive verdict'.¹⁹ The expectation of miracle cures resembled the general Victorian ardour for quack medical remedies. Even emergent small holding schemes with rigid land division and standard cottages conformed to the notion of a universal solution regardless of geographical variance, despite being theoretically constructed upon a preservation of parochial structures.

Parliament was perceived to have abandoned agriculture, being dominated by urban industrial sympathies, despite the inauguration of two separate Royal

Commissions on agricultural depression along side a governmental report into rural population decline. This rejection induced a specifically agrarian paranoia and an ill-concealed fatalism, the second strand of a psychology of depression. W.G. Bingham writing in *The Times* sensed agriculture was on 'trial', even from its own experts and not just a sceptical public.²⁰ Henry Liversidge recorded that

*...those well able to judge, who have considered the question with a full knowledge of every particular, and a long experience, confess they can see no hope of any improvement, but the reverse under present conditions.*²¹

The use of 'confess' seems highly appropriate, as farmers failed to accept charges for the uncompetiveness of English farming, such as uninspired production methods and an alleged extravagance of lifestyle.²² "Agricola" was moved to defend farmers from accusations of indulgence. However his observation that profligate living did not exist was based entirely upon his own neighbourhood, which is never actually located for the benefit of the reader.²³ Bingham's sensation of public prosecution and arraignment related to a palpable resentment towards the continued self-importance of the farming lobby, what could be termed 'agro-centrism'. Pleas of impecuniosity so abruptly after the celebrated 'Golden Age' were rejected amongst the general public at large. F.A. Channing who famously dissented from the majority report of the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression depicted the lack of sympathy for farmers by stating 'the world at large is somewhat weary of the woes of agriculturalists, and disposed to turn with impatience from the thin platitudes and theatrical laments of most agricultural enquiries', in the process ascribing the impression of an assailant public.²⁴ If depression could be claimed as a series of mythologies built upon imperfections of communication, a point developed further in relation to the location of idiosyncratic recessionary ideas within the village, this second sense of a psychology of agrarian depression, acute paranoia, can be explained by the absence of a dialogue between two very different ideologies, one urban, the other rural or more accurately agricultural.

The third psychological aspect developed into a behavioural manifestation, exemplified by apathy and a sense of futility. E.F. de Man was convinced English farmers lacked enterprise. However, fruitless efforts to overcome depression such as the troubled conversion of arable land to pasture could well have jaded farming appetites for other innovative solutions.²⁵ Sir William Cooper urged a confrontation with inaction stating 'the battles...to be waged are...against the forces of ignorance, apathy and criminal neglect, which have wrought, and are still causing havoc in our own country'.²⁶ Cooper addressed the lack of public sympathy towards the farming lobby, but his comments held equally veritable of the farmers themselves. Some agriculturalists, alternatively, did establish a name for themselves as resourceful practitioners such as J.J. Mechi of Tiptree Farm in Essex.²⁷ Widely published, and a regular contributor to farming journals and national newspapers, Mechi espoused

original production dictate, embracing a new market gardening ethos, liberating agrarian ideas from the four course system. Mechi had initially made his fortune as a cutler with a shop on Leadenhall Street, London, launching the highly successful 'magic razor strop' before buying Tiptree Farm, a 130 acre property for £3,400 in 1841. Mechi was convinced investments in farm improvement would ultimately raise land values. In an article for *The Times* he identified Surrey and Sussex as two counties where little or no capital had been advanced for this purpose and had promptly endured some of the worst cases of farming distress.²⁸ Mechi's approach required bold decisions and calculated risks, investing heavily in deep drainage and steam power. But the English farmer or more precisely in a southern context, the landowner, proved reluctant to accept ideas that involved committing further capital. Like the eighteenth century agricultural reformers Mechi was a gifted self-publicist rather than an above average farmer and his ideas remained untypical of farming responses to depression. In a sense he evoked the tradition of the gentlemen improvers from a century earlier. Nevertheless, the market gardening approach he proclaimed formed the economic backbone to the later agrarian small holding resolution. Yet Mechi's involvement in jam production, a strong capital backing and his Italian descent rendered his experience untypical to many farmers.²⁹ This national chauvinism proves highly indicative of the agrarian state of mind: farmers were unable to accept new ideas not indigenous to the industry, believing centuries of agrarian tradition made them alone qualified to pronounce on English cultivation.³⁰ Figures like Mechi demonstrated in comparison that home farmers were ill-equipped to guard the national mainstay industry. However Mechi was to be undone by the depression in agriculture. On the 14 December 1880, just twelve days before his death, Mechi was forced into liquidation. The disastrous season of 1879 had been the final act that compromised his financial situation. However, his position had been precipitated by disastrous luck with his capital committed in places other than the farm, most notably the collapse of the Unity Joint Stock Bank of which he was a governor.

2.1.2 Local Knowledge and the Rootedness of Farming

Farming methods were essentially organic, evolving from within the locale, sensitively tuned to the needs of soil, climate and community. Knowledge for farmers, typically, was rooted and remained untransferable across space. Rider Haggard writing in *Rural England* claimed English farmers 'look too much to their intimate and private interests, and allow their views to be hedged too closely by the conditions of their immediate neighbourhood'.³¹ Postulated ideas on depression matured by similar means. Villages by their very nature of spatially constricted social behaviour overstated the psychological effects of depression. Cases of failure were personally felt amongst neighbours unlike a desensitized reading from a newspaper. Whole

villages could suffer the same disastrous effects, particularly in the tightly regulated economy of a closed village. Thus Philip Lowe can state that parishes in their entirety sunk into depression.³² Many farmers pursued the same practices upon shared soil types. Local advantages such as superior soil quality became more, rather than less, important during the depression.³³ So for example, when one contributor to *The Times* discovered countless 'husbandmen have been smitten heavily by the disastrous conjunction of continuous bad seasons' on The Weald in Sussex, the shared experiences within an areally constricted place were observed.³⁴

However, though the effects of physical determinants was critical in influencing economic outcomes, psychological readings of localised failure were more complex. The ascendancy of depression transpired sequentially within individual villages. One farmer may quit a tenancy, another may be bankrupted, but when farms lay empty work was denied to local labourers. Ultimately forced by economic necessity, the labourer sought employment elsewhere, which invariably meant the city. Thus not only was a labour shortage propagated, but the ancient social fabric of the village was erased. Within a tight-knit community such social disruptions were felt keenly. To compound the problem, deserted farms roughly equated to abandoned land, leaving a visage that exuded distress.³⁵

The idea farmers failed to understand conditions beyond a specific locale is an obvious one. Equally, knowledge on conditions and methods elsewhere did not filter through to the village. For example, vital information on overseas methods failed to filtrate from the top down. Information on North American farmers remained untapped on the other side of the Atlantic.³⁶ This point was crucial in determining the competitive ability of British farmers because in reality comprehension of their market rivals was limited. The problem of communication lay in the *receipt* of information. Conversely, farming experts such as Roland Prothero proclaimed localism no longer existed, asserting 'at the present day, means of communication are easy; agriculture has ceased to be self-sufficing'.³⁷ For the enterprising farmer, this position held true, but many clung to convention. Equally the intense local geography within which farming operated needed greater recognition before potential solutions for depression could be implemented. Evershed bemoaned the tendency to regard land as a 'geometric space' and not a sensitive arena upon which countless individual actions were played out.³⁸

In summary, understanding how farmers conceived depression within the locale aids a comprehension of the first two aspects of a psychology of depression, namely the evolution of an agrarian mindset and a collective psychosis typified by paranoia and fatalism. Understanding how farmers behaved locally in response to such conceptualisations addresses the third aspect of recessional psychology, the manifestation of apathy and ignorance.

2.1.3 Agriculture and Distress: Natural Causes

Explanations for depression originating from within the farming industry are broadly reducible into three categories: natural factors, economic reasoning and influences beyond the control of most farmers. The Richmond Commission of 1879-82 blamed a run of bad seasons and foreign competition as the chief contributors to depression, factors that fitted into the first two categories of explanation. Crucially, all exegeses, except the most nonsensical were interchangeable. Bad weather could not abet depression in isolation. A backdrop of financial uncertainty provided additional causality. Perry proposes that if farmers sought a climatic explanation to the depression as opposed to economic determinism, then such 'misperceptions' would shape any response to alleviate distress. Yet the term 'misperceptions' represents an historically determined judgement made with the benefit of hindsight. To farmers, the natural threat appeared real.

Poor weather did not impact as a singular natural factor. Apart from variable rainfall in terms of occurrence and persistence, soil type or more precisely their related workability under stress influenced the prospects of financial survival through inclement seasons which in turn determined agrarian responses. In this particular case, an over-reliance upon natural phenomena as causal factors rendered farming responses short term and reactionary, typified by rent remissions when long-term counteractive economic plans were required to confront foreign competition.³⁹

The most obvious natural factor behind the onset of depression, as read by farmers, was bad weather. Following a series of exceptionally wet years between 1874 and 1879, farmers had not reaped the benefits of a successful harvest for over half a decade.⁴⁰ Smith recalled the especially drenched year of 1878 in Essex.

[The harvest of 1878]...marked the beginning of the worst period father remembers in weather and farming conditions. Rain fell day after day...and when at last the weather broke for a day or two, the farmers carted in their corn still damp in a desperate attempt to save some of it before the rain began again.⁴¹

The initial imputation of climatic factors was well documented. Dr Fream's evidence on average precipitation levels from 1866 to 1895 demonstrated wild fluctuations of rainfall levels. For example in 1879, Cambridge recorded 31.3 inches of rain. In 1887, the figure was just 15.9 inches.⁴² Alfred J. Burrows wrote 'genial seasons, more than all other causes combined, must be relied on to restore prosperity', exhibiting the sentiment that farmers merely had to wait until nature had run its course.⁴³ For one Scottish landowner, the weather, not foreign competition, represented the 'real cause' of depression with eight seasons of poor weather.⁴⁴ James Caird offered economic validation to the natural explanation for depression,

contending agriculture had lost upward of £120,000,000 through bad harvests derived from poor seasons.⁴⁵ Even after twenty years of foreign competition and the apparent recognition of market forces, C.S. Read was still convinced prolonged depression, though initially the result of a series of wet years, was now furthered by drought conditions of the early 1890s and a return to damp seasons during the summer and autumn of 1896.⁴⁶ From a post-World War I perspective, Reginald Lennard was able to conclude farmers had persistently exaggerated incorrect reasons for failure, continually ignoring underlying explanations that agriculture was over-burdened, both in terms of numbers employed and excessive local taxes; out-moded in method and uncompetitive.

It is perhaps a consequence of the English genius for extemporisation in practical matters that social and economic questions seldom receive much attention in this country, except when some immediately pressing difficulty has arisen; and then the temporary features of the problem which have induced its consideration necessarily seem larger and more important than they really are, and those features which are more permanent and ultimately of greater significance tend to escape public notice.⁴⁷

Perry's 'misperception' appraisal appears misleading, condemning late nineteenth-century farmers for acting irresponsibly and incorrectly. Farming expertise lay in reading the land and interpreting the weather, not macro-economics. But did a geography of natural explanations exist? The perceived threat from depression did not adhere to a universal malaise, but in fact contained a heavy degree of spatiality. Naturally physical determinants enacted upon financial outcomes. The minority report to the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression noted roughly one-third of England was under threat, the majority of this area was in the south and east, having been blighted by a run of poor seasons.⁴⁸ The language of southern English witnesses to the second Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression appears overtly fatalistic and damning in comparison with northern English and Celtic counterparts.⁴⁹ Herman Biddell, typically, believed land in Suffolk was in a 'very bad state', deteriorating annually through the inability of farmers to maintain cultivating standards for a variety of reasons, equally economic, social and natural.⁵⁰ W.E. Bear presumed bad seasons in southern England aggravated poor yields of corn and a decay in soil quality.

Last year [1893] of course was a dreadful year. I suppose the year before was not a good one, but there is no doubt that for the south of England last years harvest was the worst harvest they had ever had.⁵¹

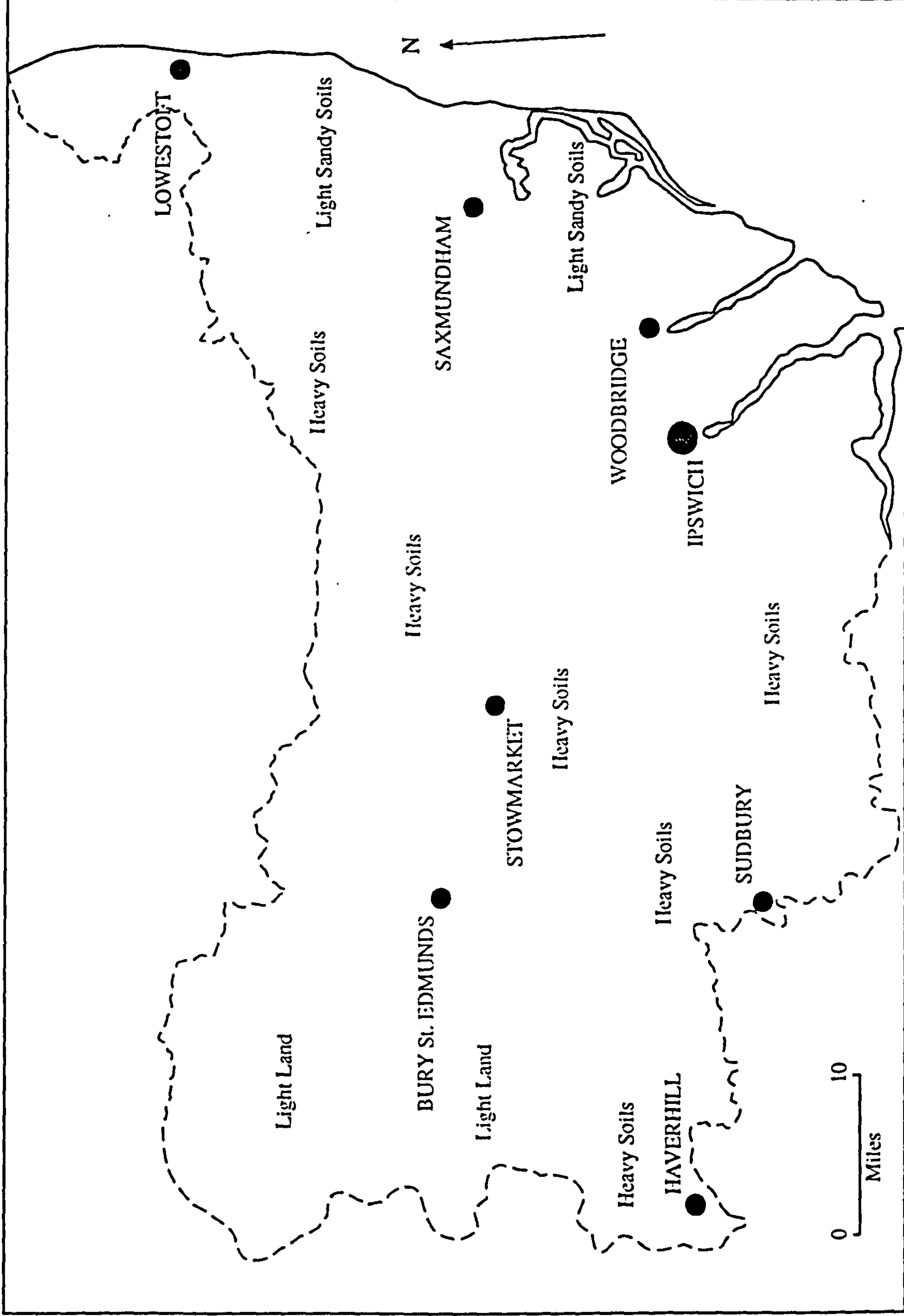
Both Sir Massey Lopes from South Devon and Jethro Lousley defended farmers for gamely persevering, though ultimately failing, to keep ahead of depression.⁵² It is this sense of farming falling behind competitors, falling behind the encroachment of nature if productivity levels were not sustained that fuels the vicious circle of decline.

Throughout physical or psychological aspects of depression, the pattern of behaviour was not rigid or stable. Therefore examples arose of especially bad farm failure in northern counties such as Northumberland, where Arthur Wilson Fox estimated land deteriorated by as much as 30% across the county.⁵³

Location in space in association with unfavourable weather affected farming life chances. This geography of deficit and prosperity was defined by a second natural factor: soil type. Inconstant quality of local soils caused by excessive dampness represented an initial determinant of the occurrence of depression. The predominantly arable county of Suffolk offers a useful example of how the joint effects of poor weather and certain soils combined to impoverish select farmers. A variable geography of misfortune emerges because soil types responded differentially to excessive rain, determining the degree of ease afforded for cultivation. Though Suffolk may not possess sharp topographic distinctions like Shropshire or Somerset, a division in soil classification prevailed between the light soils both west of Bury St. Edmunds (known as the Fieldings) and the Eastern Suffolk Sandlings with the heavy soils that constituted the central belt.⁵⁴ (Figure 1) Light soils were predominantly covered by sheep walk upon which a moderately successful lamb breeding industry was situated. Some pasture was located on heavy clays in the middle division of the county, though they tended to favour wheat horticulture.⁵⁵

Clays before the depression had been successfully cultivated under mixed farming yet incurred financial losses foremost. S.B.C. Druce, Assistant Commissioner to the Eastern Counties for the Richmond Commission found farmers on cold heavy clays endured depression first through the requirement of greater effort, which was not forthcoming, to maintain productivity on sodden soils. By blending natural and economic explanations, an additional conclusion that depression hit hardest on clays was based on farmers having more to lose with a relative deterioration in

Figure 1: County of Suffolk



profits ostensibly more spectacular in comparison with continually marginal farming upon the light soil heaths of Breckland.⁵⁶ However, it was not uncommon for uncultivated land to produce game and rabbits in Suffolk, particularly, as John Sheail identifies on the lighter soils of the north and west. With few tenants remaining, the land was freely allowed to revert to warren to the extent that 'it may be said that rabbits completely took over the land when human creditors took over the near bankrupt farms'.⁵⁷ Suffolk illustrated that soil classification shaped farming responses in addition to depression occurrence where arable cultivation proved impossible, persuading or dissuading arable farmers to convert to grassland agriculture where consistent profits could be gained.⁵⁸ As a new grazing county, Suffolk endured a satisfactory reputation, largely built on the success of the lamb industry despite the outbreak of liver fluke in 1880 and 1881. But few farmers retained good quality pasture and proved unable to exploit the lucrative milk trade. In summary, the influence of soils upon Suffolk agrarian fortunes was two-fold. Firstly, the clays in combination with damp weather became easily waterlogged and more difficult, and thereby more expensive, to manage, accelerating the economic effects of depression. Secondly, Suffolk soils were judged to be unresponsive to pasture. However, despite the physical basis of this assessment, the claim was more imagined than real. Wilson Fox found nearly all respondents in Suffolk felt the clays 'would not take grass', with the sward dying within a few years of conversion.⁵⁹ However, simultaneous claims that land drainage had been neglected except on the most superior of lands, and recognition of the fact that the poorest quality soils was more likely to be land rendered for conversion suggests the successful growth of pasture was impeded by unsuited methodologies and deficient capital. Ultimately, but only after additional economic factors had impinged, the position of the farmer was determined by the workability of his or her soils.

Dengie Hundred in Essex presented similar experiences upon stiff blue-grey or brown clays, described as 'desolate in the extreme' following bad weather and diminished capital investment to sustain soil quality through techniques such as drainage.⁶⁰ The clays in Dengie were especially susceptible to meteorological vagaries. During the autumn of 1880 the local marshland around Southminster was permanently inundated.⁶¹ One contemporary account from the village of Althorne highlights perceived difficulties confronting local farmers.

*Our subsoil is stiff, numb, dumb and impervious, so that during heavy rains the vegetable mould and manures are washed off the surface onto the great mud beds on the Crouch and Blackwater rivers. The plants are at once mud and waterlogged starved.*⁶²

An abstruse spatial distinction between soil types predominated in eastern Essex, such as in the vicinity of Gibcracks Farm near Chelmsford, where uncommonly stiff clay

had reverted to tumbledown. Within a mile, the land became friable and root crops were successfully grown. However, the next farm in sequence was again situated on unresponsive soil with the property recorded as wilderness.⁶³ Natural factors may have impeded production, but underlying this assumption rested an economic determinant as declining profits and an unwillingness to invest in costly improvements exacerbated natural effects. Lawes and Gilbert suggested arable farming was retreating to areas where climate proved favourable and soils responsive, though critically, their appraisal disregarded the psychological component of faith in an ability to survive under established methodologies until the culmination of depression, a confidence few farmers possessed.⁶⁴ The switch from natural to economic explanations was not immediate. Quite legitimately for many farmers, it was physical factors that had undone them by exposing the short-termism of tenant capital without fixed assets and the fragility of previous profit margins.

2.1.4 The Death of Agriculture: Economic Explanations

Economists and farmers failed to agree on the origins of depression. Two theories on failure consequently emerged. The first theory recognised farming as out-moded and uncompetitive, a view not shared by most farmers. A second conception fabricated by the farming lobby contended agriculture had been undone by conflictive fiscal factors such as unnecessary tax burdens. The belligerent tone of W.T. Carrington illustrated the gulf between the two opposing factions claiming the intervention of economists 'think[ing] themselves fully qualified to teach the farmers their business' in urging an arrest to "laying down" permanent pasture was inappropriate and unwelcome.⁶⁵ Joseph Arch, the National Agricultural Labourers' Union leader asserted nobody understood agrarian fortune better than farmers themselves.⁶⁶

Farmers were late in abandoning natural factors as sole explanations behind the extent and depth of depression. The agricultural community also reacted slowly to the idea that agriculture no longer operated within a discrete economic structure. Some farmers had expanded into serving distant urban markets, supplying London with milk and market gardening produce, transforming traditional areal limits to agrarian capital.⁶⁷ Indeed, Koning dismisses the idea that farming and entrepreneurial capital did not co-exist.⁶⁸ However, the industry failed to conceive the permanent threat from foreign competition. W.L. Huskinson, giving evidence before the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression blamed ambiguous 'financial changes in Europe' and indeed, French and German counterparts equally suffered.⁶⁹ Yet the economic problem did not reside in Europe, but within the vast acres of North America and Australasia.⁷⁰

The influx of foreign competition at the end of the nineteenth-century cajoled farming, the last industry organised on pre-modern foundations into the global

expansion of capital. Competition from foreign grains symbolised the compression of time and space, a process farmers had gradually exploited at a national level with the potential of railways serving burgeoning urban markets.⁷¹ Yet farmers patently failed to understand the overseas threat as just that, a menace. Cheap grain was interpreted as a temporary phenomenon, and certainly those British farmers that converted to pasture could not have foreseen the advent of refrigeration processes enabling the importation of meat from Australia, New Zealand and Argentina. Thus Andrew Doyle, Assistant Commissioner for the West Midland counties on behalf of the Richmond Commission could report 'most respondents blamed depression on the general wetness. *One or two* felt foreign competition [was to blame]'.⁷² Herein lies the problem with communication across space. As evidence before the later Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression testifies, expert witnesses and the atypical tenants that gave evidence before the commission appear more attuned to the threat from foreign competition. Joseph Reynolds, a dairy farmer, felt under threat from the importation into London of cheap Danish and Norwegian milk.⁷³ No aspect of farming was immune from the foreign threat. Charles Radcliffe Cooke M.P., the member for Hereford and Chairman of the National Association of Cidermakers, complained that the greatly increased importation of American cider rose exponentially during 1893 to compromise the share of the market held by domestic producers, the only other competition being the relatively small 20,000 gallons imported from France annually.⁷⁴ Even market gardens in Lincolnshire felt intimidated by foreign competition. The biggest threat was posed by exports from Spain and France, particularly of currants, gooseberries, apples and pears.⁷⁵ For some witnesses such as George Adams, a tenant farmer from Faringdon in Berkshire, the conversion to economic theory was a late realisation that competition was the real cause of diminished profits on his farm in 1893 as the quality or yield of crops had not declined despite appalling weather throughout the farming year.⁷⁶

The importance attached to foreign competition was evident in the increased attention paid to the subject by the later Royal Commission.⁷⁷ Figures such as W.L. Huskinson noted the influence of increased competition since 1880, though not all farmers seemed cognizant. Indeed, though depression was precipitated by poor seasons, for Huskinson, the agrarian slump related to low prices caused by the influx of foreign produce into British markets.⁷⁸ H.H. Scott of the Newcastle Farmers' Club diagnosed the problem as an inundation of markets depressing price levels '...to such an extent that we cannot grow the crops at the price'.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the commissioners in cross-examining witnesses seemed unwilling to explore foreign rivalry beyond a simple flooding of the market-place, typically confirming that the witness believed foreign competition was responsible for distress. Perhaps the intention was to avoid the contentious and highly divisive issue of Protection. The

example of questions put before William Lipscomb, the land agent on the Savile estates in Yorkshire and Chairman of the Tenant Right Committee of the Central Chamber of Agriculture illustrate the point.

[20,692] What is your view as to the main cause of agricultural depression?
- *I have not the smallest possible doubt that it is entirely due to foreign competition.*

[20,693] Foreign competition affecting agriculture here by a fall of prices? -
By the fall in prices caused by foreign competition.

[20,694] You hold that the cause of agricultural depression is a fall in prices and that the fall is caused by foreign competition? - *Yes.*⁸⁰

The issue of low prices needed conceptual refinement. As J.S. Forster, a large tenant farmer from Northumberland noted, farmers suffered less from *low* prices, and more from the instability of *falling* prices, being unable to budget the cost of production to allow for the exact level of falling returns. 'Because we cannot get a basis of operations...no sooner do we take a farm than we find it has become too dear'.⁸¹ The problem was what Forster described as a 'question of rent', a fixed sum that took no account of the fall in prices across a year, questioning the usefulness of English agriculture operating within a landlordist system.

Rather than adapt to a new economic future, farmers sought recriminations for distress. Absence of protection and a feeling of abandonment by Parliament instilled resentment amongst the farming lobby, angered by the paucity of encouragement similar to that bestowed upon foreign farmers by their respective governments.⁸² Protection proved especially pertinent, revealing the reluctance of farmers for greater engagement in commercial activities.⁸³ C.W. Smith proclaimed depression had become distended by capitalist speculation in wheat futures and gambling in other 'fictitious products'.⁸⁴ His plea that only Protection could remove this commercial threat was met with scepticism. F.W. Wilson also called for a definite answer on Protection from Parliament, surmising farmers were delaying their response to depression in anticipation of a re-introduction of Protection.⁸⁵ Beyond indignation at being disregarded, the attitude of English farmers in comparison with their American counterparts was questioned. J.W. Root noted American farmers displayed unbounded optimism. British agriculturalists were despondent, fearing 'evil days are in store' that no strenuous effort could avert.⁸⁶ Unsurprisingly, the British agrarian retort failed to confront the foreign influx both in home markets and abroad. Even more isolated in support were proposals such as those put forward by "Matje" for the creation of an imperial trade bloc, ostensibly for the growth of free trade, but with the underlying assumption that British agriculture would be afforded some protection through a system of tariffs and quotas. Overwhelmingly, Britain's overseas colonies formed the major source of competitive production.⁸⁷ The basis of such action appeared to suggest British agriculture had to avoid direct dealing with market forces. However, there was something deeply problematic in this assessment. Farming had

always been involved in the marketing of produce. The preceding era of prosperity had been based upon high grain prices.⁸⁸ Depression following the Napoleonic wars was the result of a price slump. The lack of a unified concerted movement to repel competition revealed the real fear for observers such as "Matje": British farmers did not possess the competitive sophistication to combat cheap imports. Arguments that British farming would be undercut in the market-place subsequent to the removal of Protective duties were raised thirty years prior, yet farmers adapted to such a negligible degree that they were shocked when cheap foodstuffs finally undermined their market position. Betraying an inability to handle the pressures of the new marketplace, farmers panicked when prices fell through competition. Grain markets in particular were not literally inundated, though George Jamieson's diagnosis that 'an exceptionally good harvest over the whole world' during 1885 aggravated depression tends to agree with the sudden saturation theory.⁸⁹

Farmers, though divided in their ascription of the real causes of failure, were nearly united on one issue - an entitlement to unimpeded trading and the removal of tax burdens giving capital advantage to foreign rivals.⁹⁰ Thomas Duckham, a former Member of Parliament for Herefordshire, though blaming foreign competition for the slump in agricultural prices concluded the only cure for depression lay in the unburdening of local taxes, propounding the notion of unrestricted cultivation.⁹¹ Farmers repeatedly called for the removal of 'burdens of the land'.⁹² These were taxes such as tithe rates; Poor, County and lighting rates; School board rates and land taxes excessively charged during an era of low returns. Reflective of the collective sense of paranoia, farmers felt unfairly singled out by the tax system. "H.T.F." writing in *The Times* claimed 'with the unequal burdens imposed upon land as compared with other descriptions of property, it is no wonder that the owners and occupiers of the land system complain'.⁹³ Albert Pell proposed scrapping tax based on rent in the case of farmers, favouring rates based on profits received in the absence of outright tax relief.⁹⁴ F.J. Coverdale questioned whether the removal of tax burdens would actually return any material gain to farmers, because most taxes were actually paid by landowners as part of various rescue packages along with rental abatement. He claimed throughout Essex, his home area, and England as a whole, farmers paid no more than 5% towards building, road and fence maintenance in rural areas. However, as a means of placing British farmers on equal footing with foreign competitors, even if the gesture was more symbolic than real, burdens should be eradicated, ran the farming argument.⁹⁵

2.1.5 The Death of Agriculture: Extraneous Factors

Though climatic effects were beyond the control of farmers, certain rural observers attributed the depression to divine retribution against moral and spiritual decay in

Victorian Britain. In a penny-pamphlet Samuel Garratt attributed farming distress, not solely in Britain, but across Europe and North America, to the rapacious onslaught on traditional values by industrial modernism.

It is not to be lost sight of that this visitation of agricultural distress is not on this nation only, but on the whole civilised world - on all Europe, and even America is not exempt...it is highly probable that it is some special sin of the age in which we live, which is common to all the great family of nations, constituting what we mean by Christendom, or the civilised world, which is especially, at this time, provoking God's anger.⁹⁶

Unhelpfully, Garratt offered no propositions for a resolution to depression, nor is it clear whether he spoke for a large number of farmers. Certainly his explanation concurred with the farming tendency to apportion blame to anyone except themselves.

2.2 Depression and the Multiplication of Meaning

A conceptual layer constructed upon individual meanings and assumptions endured that reflected more personalised fears within a local geography such as a loss of livelihood, a crisis of ideas, and a sense of profligacy. The late-Victorian search for a general English cosmology in which cultural acts were generated and social interactions performed offers a further layer examined in the next chapter.⁹⁷ A third intermediate layer also existed: the collective consciousness of the agricultural community, a nebulous body of opinion dependent on a district, county or even regional geography and therefore a particular production method. Collective anxieties are harder to pin down than would logically be assumed, beyond the obvious rhetoric of pro-farming faith. Consensus was rare. Somewhat problematically, reference to agrarian/technical journals or the minutes of local Chambers of Agriculture reveal how landlordist positions dominated proceedings, with perhaps minor infusions of tenant farmer interest by one or two articulate, and therefore one must assume exceptional individuals.⁹⁸ The labouring voice was silent. Membership of the Essex Chamber of Agriculture proves indicative, more so considering the relative absence in the county of a sizeable landowning interest.⁹⁹ Sir Charles Du Cane, local patriarch was the outgoing president of the Chamber in 1878, James Round M.P. the incoming figurehead. Capt. Delf dominated the Annual Meeting held in January 1879 addressing the assembly with a paper on the law of distress in relation to rural hardship, with Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, Sidney Pattison and W.W. Glenny, all local landlords, present.¹⁰⁰ The attendance of peers and politicians confirms subjective boundaries between explicitly agrarian levels at which the depression was read, from national to parochial were to a degree blurred. More importantly, the incursion of land owning interests suggested dominant voices within the agricultural community did not necessarily reflect farmers themselves. This assumption asks important questions on

the constitution of farming community 'membership'. Landlords and tenant farmers were critical of the quality and cost of labour, assigning a significant proportion of blame for depression upon labourer demands for a better wage. James Hope, an Assistant Commissioner to the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression, felt the cost of labour had risen by anything up to 15% across the whole of England since the mid-1880's.¹⁰¹ John Treadwell, a tenant farmer of over 900 acres on the estate of Baron de Rothschild at Upper Winchenden, near Aylesbury, claimed the cost of labour had been punitive to the production costs of his operation. 'I pay about £2,000 a year in labour, and I am at my wits end to know how to get the money to pay it'.¹⁰² As the labouring voice was subdued and this criticism widely publicised as farming opinion, one must assume labourers were excluded from any notion of 'farming community' despite the labouring class forming the largest group of people working the land. Yet in the crop growing counties of East Anglia where some of the worst excesses of depression were recorded, wages had been kept deliberately low at around 11 or 12s per week by employment of more hands than was economical.¹⁰³ Though union agitation prompted the call for greater remuneration for labour, the traditional system of seasonally adjusted wages in arable areas broke down with poor returns from a run of unsuccessful harvests. Labouring wage demands merely compounded the farmers sense of constriction.

Counties such as Shropshire with a varied geography of upland farming in the south, lowland dairy pasture in the north and a mixed farming belt along the Severn valley, indicate how transition of outlooks could vary within a few miles, disputing the idea of a unitary farming community voice.¹⁰⁴ Barrie Trinder contends even in late Victorian Shropshire, life in hamlets and isolated farmsteads in the south remained distinct from the nucleated settlements of the north.¹⁰⁵ The idea of united interaction at a county level seemed unconvincing, despite the rootedness of farming to village structures. With market towns such as Oswestry, Ludlow, Whitchurch, Market Drayton and Bishops Castle scattered around the county borders and Shrewsbury, the centrally-located county town, at least twenty miles distant from these nodes, the notion of a specific and uniform Shropshire agricultural community was questionable, with perhaps the local press offering any sense of collective identity amongst disparate farmers. The advent of agricultural shows, such as the Shropshire and West Midland, perhaps provided a forum for farmers to discuss new ideas, exchange old ones and make comparisons between their flocks and herds, in effect negating some of the boundaries erected by space.

Nevertheless, the presence of a number of persistent themes raised by farmers of all political hues and class reveals a degree of consistency and uniformity in opinion, most lucidly expressed through a sense that the prevailing depression had hit farmers harder than previous economic slumps, a judgement more arbitrary than real.

The previous depression had followed the Napoleonic wars over half a century earlier, an era few farmers could recall in detail. The implication was that farmers possessed little or no criteria, economic or social, upon which to define the nature and magnitude of depression. Alfred Burrows described the ferocity of depression as 'unparalleled in the history of the country'.¹⁰⁶ A.E. Parker reiterated the sentiment claiming depression to be 'a crisis of unprecedented severity'.¹⁰⁷ Charles Wadlow of the Marshbrook Agricultural Society, a small collective from the upland district of southern Shropshire reported 'agricultural distress was *never* so severely felt by the oldest amongst us at the present time'.¹⁰⁸ Whether these remarks represent a clear case of Victorian melodrama, confessed hopelessness or attention-seeking eloquence is difficult to determine. Parker touches upon the uncertainty that bewitched farmers from initiating changes and remedies. Past depressions were obviously transitory within a cycle of medium-term boom and bust, but the pronounced depth of the late nineteenth-century downturn coupled with unprecedented competition from overseas fomented a pervasive atmosphere of despair previously unseen.¹⁰⁹ In a sense, the imagined rustic state of relative constancy was smashed by the depression. Therefore, any recognition of various fatalistic tendencies held by farmers has to be detected through their use of language.

If language acts as a metaphor for the human consciousness, then it offers an important indication of the psychology of the farming community, recognising the 'membership' of this agglomeration and its bias towards certain vocalities. The proclaimed demise of agriculture betrays a clear *fin de siècle* anxiety of the future. Possessive of a rather forlorn fondness for past farming exploits, one tenant farmer declared 'my heart is broken about farming, and I do not care to throw more good money after bad'.¹¹⁰ Medico-scientific images were deployed to conjure up a sense of termination, reflecting the vogue for hybrid scientific theories to explain social phenomena.¹¹¹ Agriculture was frequently labelled moribund. A.E. Parker couched the lack of consensus between farmers in medical terms declaring 'doctors are not wanting to prescribe remedies; but among them there is the proverbial difference of opinion, both as to diagnosis and treatment'.¹¹² But this was the language of London society. It reflected an urban intellectual crisis and not depression as perceived by farmers themselves. Daniel Pick confirms that the language of degeneration spread beyond the city from its origins within debates on the London poor, and indeed later theories of racial decay transcended the urban/rural dichotomy with certain critics attesting to a specific rural racial degeneracy. This theorization also informed the language of the agricultural writer or an exponent of the rural realist movement.¹¹³ However, the farming idiom was no less inhibited than some of the wilder statements made on behalf of agriculture. Norton writing in *The Times* warned of the dangers of a loose usage of language.

*I cannot but fear [that] exaggeration and loose misstatement of the present distress may lead to a general belief in its real magnitude and severity.*¹¹⁴

As his comments were made at the inception of depression, Norton was keen to guard against over-dramatisation played out on the pages of *The Times*, in the local press, in journals, in front of an obtuse general public, although the dangers of escalating distress through circular and self-perpetuating negative appraisals were palpable. *The Times* carried a report of a meeting in January 1880 of the Newbury Chamber of Agriculture at which Mr J. Walter M.P. scoffed at the language employed by farmers at a commission held in 1836 investigating an earlier depression in agriculture. Walter finds the hysterical prognoses amusing considering the comparative lack of depth to the former depression in relation to late nineteenth-century distress. 'Anybody who read the evidence collected by that committee would be perfectly astonished by the language then used by farmers and valuers of land. Some of the witnesses said that no land could pay rent; that land must go out of cultivation, and other things to the same effect'. Walter's comments made at the start of the depression, assume a telling irony. Following two decades of depression, comments to the second Royal Commission offered equally excitable observations.¹¹⁵ Amongst all the cataclysmic statements, Lord Vernon's essay on the fortunes of the dairy industry offered an unfamiliar voice of reason.¹¹⁶ Drawing from Oliver Goldsmith's description in 1771 of English farming residing in a 'miserable state of insolvency', Vernon suggested pessimists should take comfort that farmers had survived.

A sub-text to urban-led discourses on depression, one of rural autonomy, was raised without being consciously recognised. The capacity of rural residents to administer their own lives was disputed. This position is less explicitly stated, but frequently insinuated through doubt cast upon the truthfulness of statements fabricated from within the farming community. "Persimmon" attests to an inability of farmers to make rational and authoritative judgements. "Persimmon's" critique implies objective criteria for defining depression existed. Haggard was compelled to establish between true rural sentiment and what was 'false' in collating farming opinion.¹¹⁷ Agriculture possessed an almost stately reputation to maintain. However, farmers were also portrayed as incessant moaners prone to magnifying distress, prompting "Persimmon" to declare 'it seems part and parcel of their calling to grumble'.¹¹⁸ The urban-led argument claimed farmers alone could not decide if they actually endured depression, requiring additional impartial judgement external to agriculture. In a sense, the magnitude of depression was disputed by the general public when defined by the industry itself. A confrontation emerged between the 'objectivism' of outside narrators and the intuition of the farming community. What clearly needs to be asserted in opposition to the claims of "Persimmon" is an understanding that if farmers convinced

themselves of the 'reality' and seriousness of fiscal woe, then in effect the depression did exist.

If a fatalistic thread wove the farming community together, a collective farming *response* was evident in the ceaseless exculpation of agriculture. A rather tentative explanation for this behaviour could be that agriculturalists, both owners and occupiers reacted to incessant criticism of their fallible business acumen in all forms of media, by retreating into a protective shell of repudiation. Not for the first time during the depression, onus was placed on a notion of responsibility. Responsibility presented a twin-faceted concept. Firstly, it related to culpability, simply that farmers were *responsible* for their own downfall. Agriculturalists were quick to deny blame for the economic downturn, or rather they sought to attribute blame to other causes. Some ascriptions of culpability really stretched the imagination. The more tenuous accusations became, the more one sensed farmers had taken a combative approach to resolve their embattled position. One example was an imputation of bureaucratic negligence for the outbreak of foot and mouth amongst cattle. W.T. Stanley claimed that despite the 'atmospheric' nature of the disease, the disorder had spread through inadequate governmental funding for the treatment of cattle.¹¹⁹ Expenses therefore were costed to farmers and landowners who could not afford the treatment. Additionally, an inadequate inspection system meant the disease often went undiagnosed until its severity was too great to preserve a herd.

In addition to poor financial judgement, farmers were also censured for failing a second interpretation of responsibility: a sense of duty to the nation as protector of the economic and social premier industry. The contention postulates farming malaise was self-induced, leaving the farming industry exposed to admonition and accusations of betrayal of responsibility. Farming was charged with the guardianship of the countryside, both as a vital economic resource and as an arcadian spectacle, an unwritten code that increased with importance in proportion to the allurements of anti-modernism. However, the sacrosanctity of agriculture was not solely imposed from above. Indeed the farming lobby actively cultivated the idea. J.J. Mechi speaking at a Farmers' Alliance meeting in Colchester declared 'agriculture is the greatest and most important industry in this wealthy kingdom'.¹²⁰ Unfortunately farm mismanagement was exposed at the most inopportune moment: guilty of extravagance, poor investment and neglect as the nation directed its critical gaze in a rural bearing, seeking solace from a backdrop of social upheaval. Comments by agricultural writers such as W.T. Carrington that 'an elaborate system of book-keeping is scarcely applicable to practical farming' hardly inspired public confidence.¹²¹ In this sense, farmers were alleged to have betrayed their position by not acting with haste to the impending threat of depression, leaving the nation dependent on foreign supplies.¹²² Mr T. Worthington even proposed to the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression that bad farming

be made a punishable offence.¹²³ "Persimmon" joined the criticism, typifying the feeling that the agricultural community had misplaced blame.

*...I think if they [the farming industry] would subject themselves to a thorough self-examination the result would convince even the most obdurate, that many of the wrongs they now complain of...[have] to a certain extent, been brought about by their own mistaken and indiscrete mismanagement.*¹²⁴

Despite the relegation of agriculture to sixth biggest industry, farming still commanded enormous social and cultural significance.¹²⁵ Regardless of any additional fiscal gain to the national economy, Henry Liversidge Jr predicted the revival of agriculture would provide impetus 'to commerce in many branches'.¹²⁶ This traditional elevated standing rendered the eventual neglect of agricultural issues by Parliament and the over-simplification of debate unpalatable to farming tastes.¹²⁷ Indeed the industry endured immense difficulty in accepting its negation of status.¹²⁸ Thus a conflict between the burden of responsibility and continued recognition of this obligated role emerged against a background of Parliamentary disinterest. Pressures of accountability when confronted with indifference, apathy and a lack of commitment heightened the exasperation of farmers for failing to secure financial recompense.¹²⁹

At no point was farming community paranoia more acute than in regard to the preferential importation of wheat, while across East Anglia and southern England, fertile arable land was involuntary left as tumbledown or abandoned land. Urban markets snapped up North American wheat because it was cheaper. Farmers were angered that while British-produced food was taxed, foreign foodstuffs were 'admitted free to our markets'.¹³⁰ However, one of the principal reasons for this price differential was the beneficial railway rates charged by British railway companies for foreign produce.¹³¹ R.H. Rew reported that following his investigative work as an Assistant Commissioner in the southern counties of England for the Richmond Commission, farmers felt themselves to be unduly handicapped by the transport cost differential.¹³² The explanation for this foreign bias was that American produce when landed at British ports arrived as a large quantity for a single recipient. Transport in bulk therefore would cost less than small amounts being continually loaded and unloaded at countless rural stations. The Railway and Canal Traffic Act (1888) went some way to redress this balance, and Rew notes farmers were generally pacified until the Rates and Charges Act (1893) when rates regardless of foreign or domestic origins were raised, prompting 'outbursts of indignation' once more.¹³³ Railway companies elicited further criticism from J.W. Martin who contentiously claimed 'the agricultural question was largely a railway question'. Disregarding extortionate rates, he believed certain areas were marginalised by an absence of support from railway companies intent on exploiting profitable lines at the expense of branch routes. He asserted large tracts of north Essex were reduced to wilderness by the absence of an adequate rail

infrastructure to send produce to distant urban markets despite being located within one hundred miles of London.¹³⁴ Alternatively Wisbech, nearly two hundred miles away from London in the north Cambridgeshire fenland district, had become a flourishing centre because three railway companies (Great Eastern, Midland and Great Northern Joint and Northern) served the town offering competitive rates. Not for the first time, farmers felt undone by the gradual compression of space which seemed to work against them.

The issue of responsibility is absolutely vital in understanding the collective farming psychology of depression however disparate its constituent parts may have been. It posited extra pressure upon farmers, only to heighten their sense of exasperation when the call from various farming communities for help went ignored. This sense of abandonment may have increased rural futility with regards to a profitable future for British agriculture, yet the position was entirely self-induced by the farming community proclaiming its inherent superiority over other industries.

2.3 Responding to Depression

2.3.1 Proactive Solutions to Depression

No resolute definition of depression existed. Farming responses were varied depending on the degree of attachment to either natural or economic factors, the influx of new ideas and a location in space that determined the underlying soil type. Certain farming communities appeared more conversant with improvement debates than others. Thus G.W. Robinson could conclude that Shropshire had escaped the worst excesses of depression through farmers keeping 'well abreast' of new ideas.¹³⁵ Diffusion of new ideas was often dependent upon neighbouring experiments and word of mouth. Ideas were traded through local fairs. Within the national, local and farming press numerous ideas for betterment emerged. Some farming experts, most notably J.B. Lawes from the Rothamstead agricultural research station believed by increasing production Britain could become entirely self-sufficient without the need to import wheat.¹³⁶ He asserted productivity could be increased by 33% through efficient methods. Others felt farmers had neglected profit-making cash crops such as beet-root, flax and colza from traditional four-course rotations.¹³⁷ Modern technology was continually promoted as a solution. But many farmers resisted the notion. H.E. Moore found little evidence of technology making any difference to financial and productivity outputs.¹³⁸ Yet the steam plough too frequently became a straight swap for the horseplough though with greater power, deeper ploughing was possible.¹³⁹ However, what Moore inadvertently discloses was that technology was less at fault, but rather the way it was utilized with farmers wasting the undoubted potential for cheaper cultivation.

Rather than introduce cash crops or experiment with market gardening, overwhelmingly the most popular solution by arable farmers was a conversion from arable to pasture. Against a backdrop of unprecedented bad weather and a plunge in wheat prices from a peak in 1858-59 of 54s 7d to a nadir of 26s 8d in 1874-75, a switch was enforced upon arable farmers of southern and eastern England to pasture based activities. Ploughed land was converted to grass, a deeply symbolic act representing the erasure of tradition within the bucolic homeland of England. Pasture conversion indicated the unprofitability of arable farming. Transformation from the crop growth sector occurred primarily because pasture-based production retained profitability into the 1880s until the inundation of home markets with cheap refrigerated meats from overseas.¹⁴⁰ Previously arable areas such as East Anglia implemented conversion procedures and began returning profits despite the set back of foot and mouth disease and pleuro-pneumonia.¹⁴¹ More secure profit margins were obtainable through dairy production and the supply of milk to urban markets. Proximity to a railway negated, to an extent, the importance of a location near a town or city.¹⁴² The most imaginative of farmers adapted to butter-making. However, in areas previously dedicated to cereal production, the butter created was generally of low or variable standard. Traders were forced to purchase foreign supplies from Denmark where quality was guaranteed.

The absence of any pastoral tradition in southern England left farmers inexperienced and ill-suited to undertake the risky venture of transferring methods. Burrows declared farmers aggravated the extent of depression by poor conversion techniques.¹⁴³ An anonymously authored pamphlet revealed the extent of ignorance suggesting that too many arable farmers failed to understand the conversion and maintenance of pasture as a science. The biggest problem, apart from 'cleaning' the soil before laying down grasses, was a failure to recognise that natural grasses would not produce a 'thick and permanent sward'.¹⁴⁴ Soil type also determined the success of production transformation as certain classifications accepted new pasture more readily. The preference for conversion accompanied by ensuing success or failure offered evidence on all aspects of the psychology of farmers.¹⁴⁵ The increasing momentum of the land use shift during the 1880s revealed the growing assumption from farmers that economic over natural factors now controlled the depth and extent of depression.¹⁴⁶ Speed of transformation reflected varying degrees of confidence in the industry preserving its traditional vestiges, personal financial circumstances and crucially, the prevalence of other local cases of transformation. Pasture conversion represented the most popular cure for depression prior to the inception of the small holding movement. The maintenance or abandonment of new pasture betrayed the competence of farmers adopting unaccustomed methods and their commitment to making them work. Poorly transformed pasture contributed to the manifestation of

abandoned land, its distribution indicative of the degree of failure, its impermanence exemplifying the rapid transmogrification of the depressional form.

The eventual degeneration of much of this converted land served as a metaphor for the wider decay of agricultural practices and the defeatism of a once proud industry. For farm experts like Joulie, it reflected the understandable impatience of English farmers who were not prepared to learn conversion methods properly. A particular problem was that farmers may well have been tempted to revert back to arable when after an initial couple of prosperous seasons, profits from pasture fell back to more typical levels, thus wrongly assuming the pasture system to be failing when in fact it was 'bedding down'.¹⁴⁷ Some observers were convinced a conversion fallacy existed, disputing the commonly accepted belief that production modification counterbalanced the arable price collapse. Most audible was the criticism of O.C.D. Ross.¹⁴⁸ He concluded that though the area of 'permanent pasture' may well have increased, the number of animals was relatively static or actually reducing. The figures in his research did contend that an approximate half-million increase in head of cattle had been recorded but that the number of sheep and pigs was drastically reduced by 3.8 million and 68,000 respectively. The variable nature of statistics is illustrated when similar data was produced in an earlier article for *The Times* in which, as the table below illustrates, the figures of per head animal reduction were even greater.

	Cattle	Sheep	Pigs
Number in 1874	10 281 036	34 837 597	3 537 354
Number in 1881	9 904 003	27 899 937	3 149 675
7 Year Decrease	337 003	6 937 660	387 679
Decrease %	3.3	20	11
Value Decrease (£)	4 524 036	13 875 320	581 000

Table 2: Decrease of Livestock in the United Kingdom¹⁴⁹

The conversion myth which Ross attempted to debunk countered the claim that pasture conversion offered prosperity as the decrease in value data illustrates. A pastoral transformation of the historic English landscape tradition was accompanied by a removal of the figures that populated this working vision, the agricultural labourers. Pasture maintenance required less labour and so many workers were laid off. In one respect this rationalisation of labour enabled farmers to relieve a large burden on outgoings.¹⁵⁰ Yet reflective of the many contradictions of agricultural depression, farmers simultaneously protested over a shortage of labour to work the land and farming critics lamented that the 'rural exodus has taken the best men...the stock of the rustic population has steadily deteriorated'.¹⁵¹ The overall conclusion remained that

too frequently farmers were converting their land to pasture and failing to make it pay by irregular management, leaving fields fallow, betraying the apathetic sentiment that eschewed experimentalism. But farmers on poor soils effectively had their hand forced, actuating reluctant conversion in the absence of other possible solutions.

2.3.2 Tumbledown: The Physical Manifestation of Depression

Tumbledown or abandoned land was defined by four classifications.¹⁵² The first two types, land reverted back to a natural grass state and overgrown scrub consisting of both annual rye grass (*lolium perenne*) and Italian rye (*lolium multiflorum*) were fields left for derelict, neglected as financial margins were compromised or as farms were given up. A third distinctive form of tumbledown consisted of perennial rye grass laid as pasture, primarily for its nominal cost in comparison with the seed cost for proper pasture species, but had not been broken up or tended. When management practices were reduced, poor quality pasture was the first land to degenerate.¹⁵³ Declining maintenance levels were the surest indicator of depression in the Cotswolds for J.C. Reynolds, a tenant farmer from Paxford Camden, Gloucestershire.¹⁵⁴ Finally, certain forsaken land had origins in the conversion from arable to pasture. W.F. Ingram, a Sussex land agent and representative of the East Sussex Farmers' Club, stated land was 'nearly out of cultivation' because of defective farming practices.¹⁵⁵ This wilderness vision of tumbledown was unquantifiable because 'nearly out of cultivation' was a personal judgement.

Erroneous conversion techniques and inadequate management allowed species such as twitch (*Alopecurus myosuroides*) and water grass to form a dense coverage, subsuming less hardy grasses that made up good pasture.¹⁵⁶ In Essex where the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression heard the condition of land had degraded greater than any other farmland in Britain, witnesses recorded how couch grass (*Elymus repens*), thistles (*Cirsium*), docks (*Rumex*), gorse (*Ulex*), brambles (*Rubus*) and even thorn bushes had taken hold.¹⁵⁷ Hunter Pringle claimed Essex farmers knew little of the grasses required for strong, successful pasture with the inevitable result that land was abandoned through a lack of knowledge and experience.¹⁵⁸ To compound the problem, Wilson Fox identified from his research into Suffolk agriculture a trend that land chosen for conversion had typically proven to be unremunerative for arable production, perhaps because it was deteriorating in quality. Thus worn out or poor quality land was sown with grass seed, providing little opportunity for the growth of a successful sward.

The absence of any stable criteria renders it impossible to provide an 'accurate' historical account on the extent of tumbledown. In any case the symbolic presence of abandoned land probably distorted the perceived areal extent. The Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression made a muddled attempt to determine land out of

cultivation by commissioning seven reports from Land Office Inspectors of the Board of Agriculture. However, only twelve counties were included in the survey and none were located north of Shropshire or in the celtic countries.¹⁵⁹ Three assessment criteria were selected: an approximate estimate of land held as arable over the previous five to ten years but no longer cultivated; completely abandoned arable portions of individual farms and the extent of all land on unoccupied, and thereby derelict farms. Problems arose in that the investigators opted to vary the assessment criteria. Looker's report into the counties of Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, Huntingdonshire and Suffolk created a category that assessed formerly arable land lying as poor quality pasture.¹⁶⁰ All but the most extreme tumbledown could be used for rough grazing so a confusion could potentially have arisen in differentiating between poorly converted pasture land, which an inexperienced, former-arable farmer, may regard as normal pasture and scrub.

Obvious explanations for the physical manifestation of tumbledown obscured more implicit acts of behaviour. For instance, the presence of tumbledown was not solely determined by failed conversion. Significantly, farmers often *allowed* land to fall out of cultivation for a variety of reasons. Firstly, maintenance levels dropped due to absence of capital. The Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression concluded small tenant farmers and freeholders were more prone to neglecting land because they did not possess 'the means to provide themselves with either stock or manure'.¹⁶¹ Occasionally, land left to grass was occasionally abandoned through exhaustion; overworked to preserve yields during a series of poor harvests, initially the "wet" period of 1874-79 followed by a drought in the early 1890s. From a short-term perspective, the maintenance of unacceptably high yields compensated for the fall in wheat prices.¹⁶² Thirdly, the temporary nature of much tumbledown land insinuated farmers abandoned land to allow a drop in rental values, thus avoiding high tithe rate assessments.¹⁶³ Fourthly, and finally, farmers forsook cultivation in the expectation that land could be returned in future to a profitable state, an ill-conceived judgement that failed to comprehend the costs of revitalising land. L.J. Rutter a land agent and agricultural valuer claimed to restore heavy clays to a productive state, particularly in counties such as Essex would cost around £8-£10 per acre.¹⁶⁴ Tumbledown did possess some value as poor quality grazing land, but this assessment was negligible in relation to profitable arable land.¹⁶⁵ These decisions would have proven unpalatable for the farming community as land out of cultivation represented an anathema to both an arable and pastoral production ethos. George Lambert in his dissenting paper from the Final Report of the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression affirms the point.

*The Englishman must and will farm his arable land well; he cannot bear to see it lying in grass which does not carry a heavy load of stock.*¹⁶⁶

Untamed 'wildernesses' contrasted sharply with the carefully manicured farmscapes of the Golden Age. Lowenthal and Prince note that though uncultivated and wild farmscapes may not have unduly concerned American farmers, the dilapidation of rural England would have contradicted the landscape sensibilities of farmers and urban romanticists alike.¹⁶⁷ Maintenance of landscape features such as hedgerows declined sharply, evident in the sharp growth of knapweed (*Centaurea*), foxgloves (*Digitalis purpurea*) and primroses (*Primula vulgaris*). Haggard found one local farmer who reckoned by the 1920s, hedgerows would cease to exist due to them being choked by weeds caused by the abandonment of techniques such as the cutting of thorns back to the roots.¹⁶⁸ Tumbledown was most prevalent in East Anglia, the symbolic granary of England.¹⁶⁹ In the five East Anglian counties of Cambridgeshire, Essex, Huntingdonshire, Norfolk and Suffolk the area under bare fallow, another assumed indicator of abandoned land, rose from 106,000 acres in 1878-79 to 152,000 acres in 1881-82. Both light sands and clays were afflicted.¹⁷⁰ Significantly in East Anglia, tumbledown constituted more than sporadic abandonment of fields, with an increase in the withdrawal of whole farms from cultivation by the 1890s, as tenants quit and landowners resisted the less than alluring financial trepidations of taking farms 'in hand'. The Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression reported that in Suffolk by 1895 approximately thirty-eight farms were completely abandoned totalling 4,741 acres of derelict land. The report's description of a farm in the parish of Holton near the Essex border, portrayed failure that could equally have applied to a number of other farms throughout the region.

*...the land...is a wilderness. The fences [hedges] are high and struggling, the gates are broken. Not a soul is to be seen in the fields which are rank with weeds, docks and thistles. The whole farm is just growing natural grasses and weeds.*¹⁷¹

Dereliction was equated with desolation. Haggard described the abandoned Essex countryside around Burnham on Crouch as resembling a landscape swept by fire.¹⁷² Bensusan's assessment of the Brecklands, that '...you might think their had been a plague here' such was the extent of bracken and presence of cock-pheasants and rabbits, illustrates the sense of despair.¹⁷³ Yet Albert Pell, an Assistant Commissioner to the earlier Richmond Commission reported to the second investigative committee in 1894 that north of the River Thames, land not already derelict was *not* deteriorating. Furthermore, despite depression, Pell believed cultivation in England had never been bettered.¹⁷⁴ A lack of detailed statistical evidence meant the commission had to rely upon such circumstantial evidence to establish conclusions, which further dilutes the historical possibility of reconstructing a physical geography of decay.

A notion of debasement proves useful, connecting with wider Victorian discourses of racial and moral decay. The superficial dereliction of the countryside

represented, therefore, an abandonment of traditional rural values. But these values were divided upon functionalist farming perspectives or romantic grounds. The reversion to tumbledown could be justified as a valid short-term alleviation, but a lasting presence signified the absence of any theoretical resolution to the agrarian crisis within the existing resource base. Farmers now had confirmation that financial ruin was real. Abandoned acres acted as a visible reminder of the persistence of depression.

2.4 *The Media and Depression*

Farmers, agents and landowners sought a definitive guide to the depression.¹⁷⁵ Agrarianists increasingly looked to the national, local and farming press to establish the causes of depression, its geography of occurrence and possible solutions. The filtering of information from top down dispensed with the spatiality of perception so that farmers could potentially comprehend depression without relying upon personal experiences. Thus the media exercised a deterministic role over farming opinion. J. R. Fisher offers a detailed examination of the public disposition towards agriculture, but it is the imagery and language applied in depicting depression and how this was received by the farming lobby that is of interest here. More contentiously, it is possible to suggest functional literature shaped a *perceived* geography of severity behind depression, rather than a simple location in actual space.¹⁷⁶ The greatest danger associated with this approach lies in an assumption that farmers read widely. Fisher suspected few large farmers holding over 100 acres read the press.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, Fussell suggests that though countless farming almanacs and handbooks were published during the latter-half of the nineteenth-century most farmers were only semi-literate, perhaps no more so than their labourers.¹⁷⁸ Following the introduction of elementary education, literacy rates increased to the extent that Holmes concludes roughly 80% of farmers read the local press after World War I.¹⁷⁹

A link between agrarian psychological depression and the media was conceived at the time. H.H. Smith contended farming morale would slump through relentless bombardment of extreme accounts of distress and continual exposure to public scrutiny.¹⁸⁰ The farming community believed their industry was unfairly undermined by the claim that agriculture proved unremunerative.¹⁸¹ Reference to failure presented the depression as protracted, pervasive and without resolution. 'We rarely take up a paper without reading a harrowing description of the losses and trials of our unfortunate landowners and farmers'.¹⁸² Repetition of recognisable signs of failure, such as drastic reductions in rent or the sale of landed estates by financially straitened landlords, heightened the sense of depression.¹⁸³ At the onset of depression, *The Times* regularly published local cases of rent reduction or abatement. For example, a short seven line article from 25 January 1879 was typical of many that

were to follow by stating the Marquis of Northampton had reduced rents by 10%, as had Mr G. Neville of Stubton Hall in Lincolnshire. Thus local cases are held up to public examination at a national level. The power of the press as information gatekeepers supported J.W. Martin's contention that the media consciously shaped both public and agrarian responses by accepting certain styles of articles or letters for publication. To illustrate his point, Martin asserted from his own experience that the London print media imposed rigid editorial procedures. The Conservative press published articles allowing farmers to air grievances but not propose remedies or offer 'appeals to parliament and public opinion'.¹⁸⁴ Alternatively, the Liberal or Radical press would not publish any comment from farmers, a policy Martin described as 'political opportunism' or an antagonism to all farm classes except the labouring cohort.¹⁸⁵

The local press tended to present written confirmation of parochial discussion from various agricultural societies.¹⁸⁶ The local press extended a more sympathetic forum to farming complaints. As a source material they demonstrate how certain locations retained specific diagnoses and cures for the depression. Bear noted that the readership of such papers was predominantly more country-based. J.W. Martin once more, recognized poverty in Essex had become *proverbial* due to a media manipulation of the geography of depression. Numerous instances of failure contributed to the myth of Essex as the classical depressed landscape despite conditions in the majority of the county, the coastal areas around Dengie excepted, comparing favourably with other south-eastern counties. For the metropolitan writer, Essex had become an instantly recognisable and well-worn icon of failure. Yet the publication of detailed investigative work frequently revealed the allegorical representation of Essex farming. An anonymously authored article in *The Times* illustrated the point. Attempting to ascertain the acreage of uncultivated land in England, the author discovered only 1% (or approximately 9,300 acres) of Essex farmland remained uncultivated, a figure superior to Hampshire where 10% or 44,743 acres of farmland was assessed by the author as derelict.¹⁸⁷ The effectiveness of perpetuated media myths was conveyed by the surprise registered that Essex remained *comparatively* untroubled by abandoned land. Evidently, publicity of the Essex plight meant other cases were overlooked, such as the abandonment of land in Hampshire.¹⁸⁸

*There can be no question as to the intensity of the agricultural depression in Hampshire, but whereas the misfortunes of Essex have been proclaimed far and wide throughout the country, the Hampshire farmers have borne their sorrows silently.*¹⁸⁹

Roland Prothero confessed in an 1887 account on the spread of agricultural depression commissioned by *The Manchester Guardian*, that he overwhelmingly drew his

conclusions from source material in 'the districts in which the prolonged depression was known to have produced its most disastrous results'.¹⁹⁰

Biases in representation were equally a function of ill-concealed ignorance on the subject. Walter Bear, the famous farming expert, attacked an inability of leader-writers at the national daily papers to grasp the simplest of agrarian concepts.¹⁹¹ He resented the tendency of London editors to neglect specialist writers on the depression, a practice not followed for other important subject-matter, and one that emphasised the antagonism between the media and agriculture.¹⁹² Conspiratorial claims that the agricultural voice was being stifled inspired "Agricola's" assertion that media debates over-exposed the thoughts of neutral or 'interfering' observers at the expense of legitimate agrarian comment, disclosing the indubitable reluctance of farmers to accept outside advice.¹⁹³ Martin's affirmation of 'scarcely veiled contempt and hostility of the London political press' insinuated that an alternative, uninformed depiction of failure was being written that injured the farming position.¹⁹⁴ This reiterates that within the disparate literature on failure, a 'parallel depression' was scripted, a substitute reading constructed beyond an agricultural context which aimed to seek out the most wretched cases of distress without actually contributing positive ideas conducive to formulating a remedy.

Ritual condemnation of farmers undermined industry morale. Negative press dissuaded the enterprising and those with capital from investment in a loss making industry.¹⁹⁵ Farmers were quick to realise negative representations could advance claims for special assistance from Government, but could, crucially, also machinate against its justification as the national primary industry. With this in mind, "Silverstick" warned against the relegation of agriculture to an inferior economic ranking in the absence of a fair hearing.¹⁹⁶ Benedict Anderson has most recently stated that 'print media' played a vital role in facilitating a communal sense of national identity. Following this logic, "Silverstick's" claims were given an added urgency by the media's increasingly deterministic role in moulding a distinctive national image.¹⁹⁷ Critically, agriculture had to ensure it was not crushed under the burden of its own self-criticism and the condemnation of others, if its primacy was to be assured. But evidence is forthcoming that many sections of the farming community did not expedite a more positive appraisal. Crucially, the relationship between farming and the press was not one-sided. The media communicated information on depression, often written with the urban reader and not the farmer in mind, but the basis of such reports resided in the anecdotal evidence related by farmers.

Too frequently melodramatic media representations of agriculture were determined by expressions of anxiety from farmers themselves. By returning to the findings of the anonymous author who uncovered the fallacy of the Essex myth, the inevitable assessment reached was that farmers presented the media with verbal

affirmation of failure which was promptly thrown back at them, its appearance in print manifest in an exaggerated form. Essex farmers had either been more audible, or had been given greater opportunities to vocalise their fears that ultimately destroyed the reputation the county once had as a successful mixed farming area. To compound the problem, the national farming press admitted the hopelessness of achieving any profitable state. Farmers looked to technical journals such as the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* for new ideas and guidance. Yet as Henry Liversidge identified, many of the experts were themselves immersed in recessionary fatalism.

*...those well able to judge, who have considered the question with a full knowledge of every particular, and a long experience, confess they can see no hope of any improvement, but the reverse under present conditions.*¹⁹⁸

J.C. Morton compiled a collection of doom-laden correspondences for the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* in which nearly all examples employed a fatalistic idiom, with a penchant for words such as 'gloomy' and 'disaster'.¹⁹⁹ W. Cubitt, a farmer from North Walsham typified the spirit declaring 'I have farmed for a period of forty years and never remember a season so fraught with disaster'. The essay read as a requiem to British agriculture, undone by a run of unforgiving wet seasons. 'It must be acknowledged' mourned Morton, 'that even the picture of misfortune, gloomy as it is, in which they [the correspondences] concur, does not sufficiently represent the disastrous truth of the past agricultural year'. Morton's intention of drawing together reports by farmers across the country was to reveal what methods were succeeding and where. Yet his collection of elegies reveals the absence of constructive thinking amongst farmers. He concluded no 'definitive lessons' could be made. For a farming community looking for the 'grand plan', this outcome fuelled industry pessimism while simultaneously revealing the bankruptcy of ideas.

However uncertain experts were with regard to the origins of distress, articles did appear in the farming press offering advice, most usually on conversion techniques to pasture.²⁰⁰ W.T. Hall in examining the fortunes of Shropshire agriculture found that though farmers endured nearly four decades of unprecedented depression, the agrarianist was in a better position than his post-Napoleonic War predecessor, who without the 'ready communication of ideas' that typified the new generation was condemned to farm in a rut, lacking comprehension of alien systems.²⁰¹ Papers by people like C. De Laune Faunce-De Laune described in intimate detail the composition of grasses for the profitable laying down of land to grass.²⁰² Joulie, alternatively outlined the likely experiences a newly-converted pasture farmer would face such as infertile pasture through the invasion of weeds and a deterioration of drainage.²⁰³ An anonymous writer, signing as 'Retired Norfolk Farmer' complained that farmers had been 'pestered' with too much information and counter-claims to digest.²⁰⁴ His particular concern was that too often the 'advice' was

overtly political and theoretical, failing to provide real practical remedies.²⁰⁵ The author betrays his and many other farmers support for a blueprint that all agrarianists could successfully adopt.

In conclusion, the relationship between farming and the media was more complex than the simple broadcast and receipt of information. Firstly, the content of reports, notices and published letters should be examined. The material communicated, usually evidence of depression rather than solutions, was overtly fatalistic. Responses were two-fold. Farmers on the one hand felt morale within their industry was undermined by repetitious accounts of failure. Additionally, despite the appearance of articles advocating new methods of production, obvious direction from a number of widely published experts such as R.H. Rew, W.E. Bear and J.C. Morton was lacking. All confessed to an inability to formulate a route out of the depression cycle. Alternatively, the general public response to evidence of failure ranged from hostility to indifference, a serious jolt to those within the farming community who extolled the inherent link between national identity and farming. This sharpened the farming sense that the industry had been placed on trial.

The complexity of the relationship between the media and farming lies in the supply of information to the press, which was, of course, from farmers themselves. Following this logic, farmers talked-up the extent of depression to gain recognition of the problem and then, through spatial limits to their knowledge of other conditions, believed as commonplace the reported worse case scenarios. The perceived geographical extent and depth of depression was allowed to escalate because no definitive parameters existed, thus all Essex farming was condemned as unprofitable despite, or probably because of, no accurate record of a detailed geography of deficit. As raised previously, judgements of failure were entirely arbitrary and could not be measured in any case. However, the media role was not entirely innocent. Firstly, exposés of depression would only naturally be edited for newsworthiness leading to the inclusion of unrepresentative cases. The second reason was ultimately unavoidable, reflecting the collation of farming opinion, typically expressed as proclamations of distress. Farmers readily supplied evidence of personal misfortunes, often theatrical and somewhat sensational, because the finances involved were their own. With an opportunity to voice individual adversity, farmers neglected considered responses towards the alleviation of distress. Furthermore, farmers lacked the necessary knowledge to make informed comparisons with other areas. As local circumstances were better comprehended, the national media played a crucial role in *aggregating* disparate views from across Britain. But these reports were hardly balanced. Critically, farmers received in return a broader depiction of depression that reflected the exaggerated anxieties and individual concerns for farming across Britain without cognisance of the meanings, nuances and probable explanations behind the

occurrence of depression. The national and farming media created a *virtual* geography of depression based upon sampled farming opinion expressed without reference to any standard criteria of failure. No nationally-cohesive agrarian vision existed until the media drew together accounts of failure, though in reality the uniformity of farming opinion on subjects such as inclement weather was only realised following the Richmond Commission on agricultural depression, evidence that requires reconceptualisation as a source of bias.

¹Mingay believed depression was 'really the delayed impact of a decision taken thirty years earlier - the repeal of the corn laws'. Most obviously, this historical reading of depression discounts perceived farm failure was a state of mind. G.E. Mingay, *Rural Life in Victorian England* (London 1977).

²W.E. Cooper, *The Murder of Agriculture: A National Peril* (Letchworth 1908) 40.

³N. Koning, *The Failure of Agrarian Capitalism* (London 1995).

⁴Crucially, this resisting power related to the inherent conservativeness of farmers, rather than an actual immutability. However, for urban commentators the agrarian interest became a passive backdrop to a bucolic recollection of the past.

⁵'The Englishmen of the past were land-dwellers, and their deeds are written large in history. If through the neglect or the indifference of this age they are to become city-dwellers, what will the history of coming centuries have to tell them'. Haggard's pretensions to be something more than a hobby farmer sound, in consequence, rather hollow. H.R. Haggard, *Rural England* (London 1902) Vol. II. 553.

⁶T.W. Fletcher, The Great Depression in English Agriculture 1873-96, *Economic History Review* 13 (2nd series) (1961) 417-32.

⁷This issue will be explored with greater depth in Chapter Three.

⁸ The heavy clays were typically, stiff loams, blue clayey loams, yellow clay. C.S. Orwin and E.H. Whetham, *A History of British Agriculture 1846-1914* (London 1964).

⁹Poor conversion was compounded by poor techniques, such as inadequate cleaning of soil before laying down to pasture in addition to the miserable weather. Farmers quickest off the mark in converting their soils were often penalised by excessive wetness. Furthermore, farmers were unwilling to invest the required capital needed to bring the less workable clay lands up to a productive level that would prove competitive and therefore in the long term remunerative. Doyle, A. (1881) Report Upon Agricultural Depression in the Counties of Oxford, Stafford, Warwick, Gloucester, Worcester, Salop, Hereford and Monmouth. Royal Commission on Agriculture. c2778-II; Wilson Fox, A (1895) 'Assistant Commissioner's Report into the County of Suffolk' Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression" Cd 7755 The land in the south eastern section of the county, around Market Harborough was grazing country, while the higher quality pasture around Melton Mowbray lent itself to dairying. R.M. Auty, *Leicestershire Land Use Survey* (London 1943); G. Paget and L. Irvine, *Leicestershire* (London 1950).

¹⁰The year 1879 will long be remembered as the culmination of agricultural disaster unexampled during the present generation'. Mechi's remarks do not contradict his statement quoted at the head of this chapter. Depression for him may have climaxed, but the fall out would continue for a number of years as farmers continually struggled to pay off debts incurred at the end of the 1870s. *The Times* 1 January 1880 col. c, 12.

¹¹An anonymous contributor to the *Edinburgh Review* felt that insanity levels were much higher in the countryside than in towns, and this had always been the case, rather than recent distress exacerbating the situation. '...insanity spreads largely in country districts and among the people who have been least affected by modern civilization. R. Davies, *Inside the 'House of the Mad': The Social Context of Mental Illness, Suicide and the Pressures of Rural Life in South West Wales c1860-1920 Llafur* 4.2 (1985) 20-35; Anon, Degeneration and Pessimism *Edinburgh Review* 214 (1911) 138-164.

¹²F.J. Coverdale, Report on Agricultural Depression as it Affected the Thorndon Estate (Supplement), E.R.O. D/DP E17.

¹³W.H. Mallock, Current Misconceptions of the Agricultural Problem *Nineteenth Century and After* 74 (1913) 1105-1125.

¹⁴Widespread despondency contributed to the surge in numbers wishing to abandon farming, usually for the town, with little other work available in villages dominated by the agricultural industry. "Lamda's" note on agriculture from Essex in *The Times* typified the sentiment purporting that '...many of these men occupying these farms are seeking to get rid of them as soon as possible'. *The Times* 10 September 1879 col. e, 5.

¹⁵*The Times* 7 July 1879 col. b, 9 - Letter to the Editor by "A Peer"; *The Times* 8 July 1879 col. e, 11 - Letter to the Editor by Clarke, J.A.

¹⁶A private report by the agent of the Essex estate of Lord Petre illustrates the ground root support for decisive, therefore legislative action. 'Notwithstanding all the efforts of the landlord and tenant and the advantages of a railway, which during the last few years has cut through the estate, it will go absolutely out of cultivation unless some very strong measures are taken to relieve the present depression'. Letter to Lord Petre from his agent (1890). E.R.O. D/Dpe121. B.D. Brette, *How to Save the Nation in Time of War...and do away with Agricultural Depression* (Lowestoft 1897) 5-6.

¹⁷The Farmers Alliance typically stated a plea for remedial measures from Parliament. *The Times* 13 September 1880 col. d, 6.

¹⁸'At the present moment all agriculturalists are on the tiptoe of expectation as to the report of the Royal Commission'. 'Herries' writing in *The Times* illustrates the point, '...we are all anxiously waiting for the report of the Agricultural Commission, in hope that they may propose remedies for the state of things in this country'. The fact that the 'Grand Solution' remained unfulfilled is evident in the date of Brette's pleas for a convincing and all-encompassing remedy nearly twenty years later. "Templar", *Agricultural Distress and the Royal Commission* (London 1879) 1; *The Times* 17 June 1880 col. f, 11 - Agricultural Prospects by "Herries"; B.D. Brette (1897), *Op Cit.*, 6.

¹⁹G.C. Brodrick was the warden of Merton College, Oxford. He made a number of unsuccessful attempts to enter Parliament as a Liberal. G.C. Broderick, State and Prospects of British Agriculture in 1882 *Fortnightly Review* 32 (new series) (1882) 608-624.

²⁰*The Times* 29 October 1881 col. e, 10 - Farmers Alliance Land Bill. Letter to the Editor by W.G. Bingham of Abingdon.

²¹H. Liversidge Jr, *Farming Present Condition and Future Prospects - A Scheme for the Relief of the Present Depression* (Selby 1890) 4.

²²A report in *The Times* claimed the Bishop of Peterborough in a letter to *The Stamford Mercury* firmly apportioned blame for the depression on the extravagance of the English farming lifestyle. Interestingly, the following day produced a letter from the Bishop of Peterborough stating that he had never written any correspondence to *The Stamford Mercury* criticising farmers. *The Times* 25 January 1879 col. f, 10.

²³I read that farmers keep hunters, drink champagne, and their wives and daughters are above work. It may be so, but I never met or knew or heard in my neighbourhood of such luxury or comfort, if that

mode of living is comfortable'. *The Times* 26 December 1895 col. c, 12 - Letter on Agricultural Distress by 'Agricola'.

²⁴F.A. Channing, The Commission on Agriculture *Fortnightly Review* 62 (new series) (1897a) 459-463.

²⁵*The Times* 22 August 1879 col. f, 8 - Letter to the Editor by E.F. De Man.

²⁶W.E. Cooper (1908), *Op Cit.*, pv.

²⁷R. Brigden, *Victorian Farms* (London 1986).

²⁸*The Times* 19 August 1879 col. a, 10 - Letter to the Editor by J.J. Mechi.

²⁹Mechi was the third son of Giacomo Mechi, an official at Kensington Palace originally from Bologna.

³⁰This point shall be developed in relation to the arrival of Scottish farmers in Essex.

³¹H.R. Haggard (1902), *Op Cit.* Vol. I. xiii.

³²P. Lowe, *The Rural Idyll Defended: from preservation to conservation* (London 1989).

³³P.J. Perry, *British Farming in the Great Depression 1870-1914* (Newton Abbot 1974).

³⁴The agricultural correspondent for *The Times* noted that the clustering of extreme cases of failure, such as in the Dengie Hundred of Essex, was dependent upon local physical geography, concluding that 'many of the farms at this moment laying unoccupied are situated in portions of certain counties never very famous for fertility'. *The Times* 11 August 1879 col. e, 4; *The Times* 3 September 1881 col. a, 8 - Farms out of cultivation.

³⁵P.A. Graham, one of the contributors to a rural realism literary genre recognised from his experiences in East Anglia that the affects of depression escalate unhindered within the unsuspecting village. 'When a farmer, unable to making a living of it [farming] quits his holding and the owner unable to find another tenant places a bailiff in charge merely to keep things going as is so often done in East Anglia, the mischief gradually spreads. Those broken, unkept fences, fields overgrown with weeds, buildings all out of repair mean, among other things, that the local mechanics and labourers who kept them in repair are out of work or have left the district, that the village shops where their wages would have been partly spent are being ruined by credit and the shrinking of custom, and that even the public-house is suffering'. P.A. Graham, *The Rural Exodus: the problem of the village and the town* (London 1892) 19.

³⁶J. Powell, a Worcestershire farmer felt that the Board of Agriculture was failing to supply adequate information with regard to crops from abroad. Critically, by providing better information, farmers could regulate the placing of their products on the market to ensure that the best price can be achieved. J. Powell (1894) Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-III q61,873-75.

³⁷R.E. Prothero, English Land, Law and Labour *Edinburgh Review* 165 (1887) 1-39.

³⁸H. Evershed, State and Prospects of English Agriculture *Quarterly Review* 154 175-210.

³⁹Popkin suggests that farmers in believing the depression to represent a short-term downturn in profits economised on drainage and field maintenance. E. Popkin, *The Agricultural Depression of the Late Nineteenth Century in Central Essex* (Brentwood 1964).

⁴⁰Miller Christy's reminiscence of the depression era recalls how the harvest horn was blown especially late during 1879. The lateness of the harvest was attributed to the disastrously wet summer weather. The harvest horn was a tin instrument blown by a young boy when the harvest was gathered in. This fixation with traditions illustrated how far English farming was from embracing the realities of global agrarian markets. The Chelmsford Chronicle similarly reported that Essex farmers believed the 'unpropitious season' for the degraded state of crops in the county. M. Christy, *The Harvest Horn* in *Essex Essex Review* 32 (No. 125) (1923) 1-2; *The Chelmsford Chronicle* 29 August 1879 col. d, 6 - Agricultural Notes.

⁴¹Smith also recounted other, more extreme, cases where the weather conspired against farmers. On the day following Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in June 1897 a terrific storm hit West Hanningfield immediately south of Chelmsford that succeeded in flattening and ultimately destroying crops and killing chickens in the process. D. Smith, *No Rain in Those Clouds* (London 1943) 21 and 86.

⁴²Appendix. Final Report. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression (1896) c8540, 108.

⁴³A.J. Burrows, *The Agricultural Depression and How To Meet It: Hints to Landowners and Tenant Farmers* (London 1882) iii.

⁴⁴*The Times* 2 October 1879 col. e, 8 - Letter to the Editor by "A Scotch Landowner".

⁴⁵J. Caird, Inaugural Address as President *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 43 (1880) 559-72.

⁴⁶Clare Sewell Read sat as a Conservative M.P. For a number of years in Lincolnshire. A large landowner, he was the chairman of the Farmers Club in 1868 and 1892. Additionally, he sat on several Parliamentary Committees on Agriculture. *The East Anglian Daily Times* 29 December 1897 - Agriculture in 1897: A Retrospect of the Year by Clare Sewell Read.

⁴⁷R. Lennard, *The Agricultural Problem* *Edinburgh Review* 244 49-58.

⁴⁸Report of the Chairman (Mr George Shaw-Leferve), Lord Rendel and Sir Robert Giffen. Second Report of the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression (1896) c7981, 22-31.

⁴⁹Richard Finney, Chairman of the Derbyshire Dairy Farmers' Association claimed land in the county was kept in good condition. This echoed the sentiments of John Edwards, a tenant farmer from Crewe who equally contended land in Cheshire had *not* deteriorated. R. Finney (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-III q35,366. J. Edwards (1894) Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-II q25,262.

⁵⁰H. Biddell (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-III q39,348.

⁵¹W.E. Bear (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-II q27,493.

⁵²Lopes was a politician and agriculturalist, possessing a reputation as a scientific farmer who invested heavily in his estates. He steered the Agricultural Ratings Act (1879) through the House of Commons. Lopes, Sir Massey (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-II q17,038; J. Lousley (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-II q31,246-259. Lousley claimed land in Berkshire had suffered continual decline in quality from 1879.

⁵³A. Wilson Fox (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-I q9,213.

⁵⁴Hind classified the heavy soils as stiff loam, yellow clay and a blue clayey loam. The light soils of the eastern Sandlings and the heath land of the north west of the county were sandy with poor chalk

present in the west. The heavier land representing the greater proportion of the county. W.H. Hind, *The Flora of Suffolk* (London 1889).

⁵⁵Barley was sown to a lesser extent.

⁵⁶A contention exists over the degree to which farmers on the lighter lands suffered. Herman Biddell, a well known local farmer suggested before the second Royal Commission on depression in 1894 that the light corn producing districts had depreciated greatest. Wilson Fox intimates a similar outcome with land being turned over to game and rabbits. But contradicting this, Thirsk and Imray claimed light land farmers suffered less drastically, affirming that the reduction of rents on their land averaged only 15%, compared to 20-40% on the heavy lands. H. Biddell A. Wilson Fox (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-III q39,350; J. Thirsk and J. Imray, *Suffolk Farming in the Nineteenth Century* (Suffolk 1958).

⁵⁷J. Sheail, *Rabbits and their History* (Newton Abbot 1971).

⁵⁸Conversion represented a gradual process over time also dependent upon capital resources sustaining continued arable cultivation, a willingness to convert and a familiarity with conversion methods refining a geography of occurrence.

⁵⁹A. Wilson Fox. Assistant Commissioners Report into the County of Suffolk. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Final Report. (1895) c7755.

⁶⁰Before depression Dengie was returned as 75% arable production. By the 1890's the balance divided equally between arable and pasture. R.H. Pringle (1894), Supplement to the report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. Assistant Commissioners Report on The Isle of Axholme and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7374, 207-341.

⁶¹K.W. Smith, Some Aspects of Agricultural Change 1870-1895 With Special Reference to the Dengie Area of Essex (unpubl. M.Sc. Thesis, University of London 1974).

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Report by G. Shaw Leferve. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence Appendix J. (1896) c8021, 611-614.

⁶⁴Lawes and Gilbert suggest that it was testimony to the brilliance of the English farmer initially, that wheat could ever be grown, contending against 'adverse economic conditions'. J.B. Lawes and J.H. Gilbert, Our Climate and Our Wheat *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 16 (2nd series) (1880) 173-210.

⁶⁵Carrington was to later give evidence before the later Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. W.T. Carrington, The Advantage of Converting Cold Clay Arable Land into Permanent Pasture and the Best Method of Doing It *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 15 (2nd series) (1879).

⁶⁶*The Times* 21 June 1880 col. f, 9 - The State of Agriculture.

⁶⁷The success of the milk trade, which J.R. Walton described as the 'only untarnished bright spot of late nineteenth-century agriculture' along with market gardening, was due to the nature of the product which required swift farm to market transfer. However, vegetables and flowers from the Low Countries were in relatively easy reach of London markets. By the 1880s Atkins suggests farmers from as far as north as Derbyshire and as west as Wiltshire supplied milk to London largely through the compression of space by the railways. J.R. Walton, Agriculture and Rural Society 1730-1914 in R.A. Dodgshon and R.A. Butlin (Eds) *An Historical Geography of England and Wales* (London 1990) P.J. Atkins, The Growth of London's Milk Trade, c1845-1914 *Journal of Transport History* 4 (1978) 208-226.

⁶⁸N. Koning (1994), *Op Cit.* 4

⁶⁹W.L. Huskinson, (1894) Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-I, q11,24-25; *The Times* 4 July 1879 col. f, 5.

⁷⁰The assumption is that the cultural determinants of distress were produced at home despite similarities with a number of other *fin de siècle* anxieties in the rest of Europe.

⁷¹The opening up of the Prairies by the railway cut transport times which made the exploitation of European markets possible. However, rapid expansion of the area under wheat was also critical. Between 1873 and 1881 16.75 million acres were added to the acreage already producing wheat. 'It is to be borne in mind that the larger proportion of the increased area brought under cultivation in the United States for wheat production and export...consisted of rich prairie land'. J.B. Lawes and J.H. Gilbert, *The Depression of Corn Prices and the Production of Wheat in some of the Chief Exporting Countries of the World* *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 7 (3rd series) (1896) 723-737; D. Harvey, *Between Space and Time: Reflections on the Geographical Imagination* *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 80 (1990) 418-435.

⁷²A. Doyle, (1881) Report Upon Agricultural Depression in the Counties of Oxford, Stafford, Warwick, Gloucester, Worcester, Salop, Hereford and Monmouth. Royal Commission on Agriculture. c2778-II.

⁷³J.F. Hall, a landowner in the dairying district of Somerset did believe butter production was a possibility as a threat was not posed from the colonies. However the real threat lay in Danish production. J.F. Hall (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-III q44,069; J. Reynolds (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-III q41,651-653.

⁷⁴C. Radcliffe Cooke (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-III q46,343.

⁷⁵A. Wilson Fox (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-IV q49,495-502.

⁷⁶G. Adams (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-III q41,908-912.

⁷⁷Nearly all the witnesses before the commission implicated foreign competition as responsible for low prices. J. Rankin M.P.; J.F.L. Rolleston; A Wilson-Fox (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400 q5,537-8; q13,395-398; q9,221.

⁷⁸W.L. Huskinson (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-I q745, 999, 1,143.

⁷⁹H.H. Scott (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-III q30,021.

⁸⁰W. Lipscomb, Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-II q20, 692-697.

⁸¹J.S. Forster (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-II q32,137.

⁸²One local agricultural society pleaded that the British government offer home farmers the same 'superior advantages' experienced by American farmers. Yet not all farming experts agreed with the popular farming belief that the erasure of Protection measures from the statute books instigated depression. Thirty years represented too long a time-lag for R.H. Rew. Furthermore, growth may not have been so pronounced during the 'Golden Age' had barriers to competitive trading not been removed. Marshbrook Agricultural Society - 'Discussion on the Royal Commission on Agriculture'. Minutes of Meeting held at Marshbrook 29 October 1879. Shropshire Local Studies Library (S.L.S.L.) C22 v.f; R.H. Rew, *An Agricultural Faggot: A Collection of Papers on Agricultural Subjects* (London 1913).

⁸³To make agriculture commercially viable, one anonymously authored pamphlet proposed that agriculture adopted the joint stock principle under the guidance of the Limited Liabilities Act. Once agriculture started behaving like a commercial venture then individual capitalists could be provided with a safe and remunerative investment. The problem was that British agriculture was pursued under the wrong economy of scale to employ modern machinery and was thus too labour intensive. In response the author proposed that no farms should be less than 1,000 acres in size, which ran counter to the popular small holding movement and that labour rationalisation by the introduction of labour-saving machinery should take place immediately. *Joint Stock Farming, A Remedy for Agricultural Depression* (London 1893) 3.

⁸⁴C.W. Smith, *Agricultural and Trade Depression - Reply to the Final Report of the British Royal Commission on Agriculture on the Question of International Gambling* (London 1897) 1-2.

⁸⁵'The first essential for the improvement of agriculture is to show the farmer whether there will or will not be Protection...while Protection is kept dangling before his eyes he clings to it for relief, and other remedies are neglected'. F.W. Wilson, *The Agricultural Position Nineteenth Century* 39 (1896) 477-81.

⁸⁶J.W. Root, *The Repopulation of the Rural Districts* (London 1901) 5.

⁸⁷"Matje", *Depression in Agriculture* (London, n.d.).

⁸⁸R. Perren, *Agriculture in Depression, 1870-1940* (Cambridge 1996) 2.

⁸⁹G.A. Jamieson, *The Present Agricultural and Financial Depression* (Edinburgh 1885) 34.

⁹⁰Bear found that farmers felt that four restrictions on free and fair competition existed: land taxes; 'virtual bonuses for foreign produce, such as preferential railway rates; the sale of adulterated food and finally the sale of genuine articles under misrepresentation. W.E. Bear, *Unfair Competition Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 6 (3rd series) 243-257.

⁹¹T. Duckham (1894), *Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-III q36,660-1.*

⁹²'Among the circumstances of the time which harass the business of agriculture, and contribute in some degree to the losses connected with it, is that of local taxation; that is to say, the disbursements consequent on the demand of local authorities'. A. Pell, *Local Taxation as it Affects Agriculture Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 6 (3rd series) 620-635.

⁹³*The Times* 20 August 1879 col. d, 8 - Letter to the Editor, signed by H.T.F.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*

⁹⁵F.J. Coverdale, *Report on Agricultural Depression as it Affected the Thorndon Estate (Supplement), E.R.O. D/DP E17.*

⁹⁶S. Garratt, *The New Paganism and Agricultural Distress* (London 1883) 1-2.

⁹⁷M.J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (Cambridge 1981); A. Howkins, *The Discovery of Rural England*, in R. Colls and P. Dodds (Eds) *Englishness, Politics and Culture 1880-1920* (London 1986).

⁹⁸Tenant farmers pooled their resources and thinking power into the Farmers Alliance, an ultimately vapid pressure group that did little to secure any real gains for the tenant farmer membership. A report in a local Essex newspaper proved indicative of how the powerful landed oligopoly perceived the Alliance, stating that none of the gentlemen of the county turned up to the annual meeting. The problem the Alliance encountered was that it not possess any active, or even Radical political figureheads such as Joseph Arch, the trade unionist, around which political action could be focused.

Chelmsford Chronicle 29 August 1879, col. a, 3 - Meeting of the Farmers Alliance. The issue of landlord interests will be dealt with in a separate section of this chapter and in the Essex case study.

⁹⁹Stamper notes a similar pattern in Shropshire. Indeed, he concludes that Victorian landlords used regional farming societies to show their interest in local agriculture. One possible critique would perhaps interpret such patronage as another extension of local social control. P. Stamper, *The Farmer Feeds Us All* (Shrewsbury 1990).

¹⁰⁰Interestingly, the composition of the Essex Agricultural Society contained the same figures. The presence of politicians like James Round offers a potential source for the conversion of national issues into local politics and eventually through the dissemination of debate through provincial papers such as the Essex Standard and the Chelmsford Chronicle, accepted facts by the lower class of the farming community. Overwhelmingly, what the example of the Essex Chamber of Agriculture reveals is that the term 'farming community' is very imprecise. Chambers of Agriculture must ultimately be judged as more blatant expressions of landlordist interest. Buxton the head of a wealthy Essex family from Earl's Colne, the son of the famous philanthropist of the same name. The family owned land in Norfolk where they experimented with model farms, taking a keen interest in agrarian affairs. *Chelmsford Chronicle* 17 January 1879, 3; *Chelmsford Chronicle* 27 June 1879, col.a-f, 10.

¹⁰¹J. Hope (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-I q12,198 and 12,353-354.

¹⁰²J. Treadwell (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-III.

¹⁰³Brown suggests that farmers felt little social obligation to provide adequate wage levels, when they themselves endured a straitening of financial circumstances. A.F.J. Brown, *Meagre Harvest: The Essex Farm Workers Struggle Against Poverty, 1750-1914* (Chelmsford 1990); A. Wilson Fox, Agricultural Wages in England and Wales During the Last Half Century *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 66 (1903).

¹⁰⁴With the issue of weather central to late Victorian agriculturalists, Andrew Doyle, Assistant Commissioner for the western Midland counties reported to the Richmond Commission that 'striking diversities' were possible within the English landscape in which both soil and climate proved markedly disparate. Shropshire, he concluded, offered a prime example. A. Doyle, (1881) Report Upon Agricultural Depression in the Counties of Oxford, Stafford, Warwick, Gloucester, Worcester, Salop, Hereford and Monmouth. Royal Commission on Agriculture. c2778-II; G.E. Fussell, Four Centuries of Farming Systems in Shropshire 1500-1900 *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society* 54 (1951).

¹⁰⁵B. Trinder, *The Agricultural Community in Shropshire: The Last Hundred Years* (Shrewsbury 1975).

¹⁰⁶A letter by 'M' typified the gloomy mood. 'Here in Kent, things have never been so bad in my recollection'. Crop levels were moderate, but a remunerative price could not be established at any of the local markets. *The Times* 14 October 1895 col. f, 10 - Letter by 'M' on the Depression. A.J. Burrows (1882), *Op Cit.* 7.

¹⁰⁷A.E. Parker, Agricultural Depression *Edinburgh Review* 151 (1880) 1-39.

¹⁰⁸Marshbrook Agricultural Society - 'Discussion on the Royal Commission on Agriculture'. Minutes of Meeting held at Marshbrook 29 October 1879. Shropshire Local Studies Library (S.L.S.L.) C22 v.f.

¹⁰⁹In a lecture to the Shropshire Chamber of Agriculture, W.T. Hall suggested that tenant farmers in the period immediately preceding and following World War I, were possibly worse off than their counterparts a century earlier at the time of the last real depression following the Napoleonic wars. The primary reason for this apparent comparative poverty lay in the sale of estate land by the local aristocracy in an attempt to unburden debt levels, but in the process forcing tenant farmers to buy their farms, thus committing disposable capital in long term mortgage repayments. Shropshire Chamber of Agriculture (1924) "A Comparison of the Conditions Affecting Agriculture in Shropshire

at the Present Time and After the Napoleonic Wars" - Lecture given by W.T. Hall. Shropshire Record Office (S.R.O.) 1296/1.

¹¹⁰*The Times* 2 July 1879 col. a, 5 - Agricultural Depression.

¹¹¹The intrusion of scientific language into agrarian discourse pre-date the later racial theorization trend that attached spiritual and biological importance to rural residency.

¹¹²A.E. Parker (1880), *Op Cit.*

¹¹³D. Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder c1848-c1918* (Cambridge 1989) 5.

¹¹⁴*The Times* 3 July 1879 col. f, 7 - Letter to the Editor by Norton.

¹¹⁵*The Times* 23 January 1880 col. d, 10 - Mr Walter M.P. at Newbury Chamber of Agriculture.

¹¹⁶Lord Vernon, Dairy Farming *Nineteenth Century* 39 (1896) 267-285.

¹¹⁷H.R. Haggard (1902), *Op Cit.* Vol. I, ix.

¹¹⁸An editorial from the *Chelmsford Chronicle* of 1879 contained a similar view, warning that 'the farmer has long been regarded as a person who was in the habit of calling out before he was hurt and we have sometimes had to confess to a belief that the suspicion was in some degree justified'. "Persimmon", *Depression in English Agriculture and its Practical Remedy* (London 1897) 3; *Chelmsford Chronicle* 13 June 1879, 7 - Editorial: The Present Position of Agriculture.

¹¹⁹W.T. Stanley, *An Opinion on one of the Proximate Causes of Agricultural Depression and the Loss of Capital Amongst Agriculturalists* (Leamington 1880) 4.

¹²⁰*The Times* 21 October 1879 col. e, 8 - The Farmers' Alliance Meeting at Colchester.

¹²¹W.T. Carrington (1879), *Op Cit.*

¹²²J. Caird, General View of British Agriculture *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 14 (new series) (1878) 277-293.

¹²³T. Worthington, (1894) Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-I q12,552.

¹²⁴"Persimmon", *Op Cit.*, 3-4.

¹²⁵George Jamieson conceded that though the economic self-importance of agriculture could be rightfully disparaged, the nation could not afford to ignore 'the paramount influence which it [agriculture] exercises in the *social* economy of the country'. G.A. Jamieson, *The Present Agricultural and Financial Depression* (Edinburgh 1885).

¹²⁶H. Liversidge Jr, *Op Cit.* 4.

¹²⁷Silverstick's chagrin at the denigration of debate stemmed from the depression '...spoken of as if the whole matter be in a nut-shell, to be dismissed and relegated to the position of a branch of industry which affected but the smallest portion of the body politic'. "Silverstick", *What Shall we do? A Treatise on the Present Agricultural Depression, its causes, effects and remedies* (Bishop's Stortford 1879) 3.

¹²⁸'England has treated her agricultural population as a thing which stood in the way of her prosperity, rather than as the true source of the nation's strength'. J. Ferguson, (n.d.) *The Land for the People - An appeal to all who work by Brain or Hand.*

¹²⁹Gommo suggested that the depression in all trades was an issue worthy of serious and considered debate not just of politicians but also of 'every Englishman'. He added that the agricultural depression should 'interest us most' in recognition of the symbolic role of agriculture in the nations fortunes, past and present. S. Gommo, *Trade Depression: or Dots and Thoughts For the Landlords of England* (St. Austell 1887) 1.

¹³⁰H. Chaytor, *Agricultural and Trade Depression* (London 1880) 12.

¹³¹One example of the price differential at work was in the carriage of fruit. J.W. Martin illustrates the point. 'What chance...has the Essex cultivator in competing with the foreign grower when a basket of fruit costs 1s 2d to carry safely to an address in London, a distance of forty miles, and 25 baskets of grapes are carried from Groendoer - a station 20 mile south of Brussels to Covent Garden Market for 2d per basket through rate, and delivered straight into the market without the slightest delay.' J.W. Martin, *The Ruin of Rural England* (London 1901) 77.

¹³²R.H. Rew, Farmers and Railway Rates *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 6 (3rd series) (1895) 288-308.

¹³³Ibid.

¹³⁴Martin was particularly angered by the disastrous effects the lack of support from the Great Eastern Railway company had precipitated upon the north Essex farming economy. An absence of investment had seen the north Essex branch line from Witham, a small town north-east of Chelmsford to Bishops Stortford neglected, leaving potential market trading with the northern and East Midlands cities squandered. He recounts the tale of one farmer how having found buyers in Manchester and Liverpool discovered that his fruit produce never arrived at the intended time. On one occasion the fruit was inexplicably left at a London station for twelve hours before being placed on a north-bound train. Unsurprisingly the fruit perished and could not be sold. J.W. Martin (1901), *Op Cit.* 66.

¹³⁵G.W. Robinson, *A Survey of the Soils and Agriculture of Shropshire* (Shrewsbury 1910).

¹³⁶This suggestion was very much one of a deeply committed agrarianist. Urban free-traders could quite correctly argue that Lawes's proposal was a return to Protection. *The Times* 15 October 1881 col. c, 10 - A Farmer's Plea For Reform.

¹³⁷*The Times* 22 August 1879 col. f, 8 - Letter to the Editor by E.F. De Man.

¹³⁸H.E. Moore, The Revival of Farming *Contemporary Review* 65 58-74.

¹³⁹As the Scottish migrant farmers to Essex later revealed, the inadequate depth of ploughing had been a significant reason behind the failure of pasture when the land had been initially turned-over in preparation for grassing down.

¹⁴⁰Sir John Lawes believed that the returns from pasture could merit their continued maintenance and improver while arable land degraded, contended commercially, pasture could be improved to pay. Sir John Lawes (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-III q40,977

¹⁴¹H. Biddell (1894) Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400 q39,350.

¹⁴²Unfortunately in the case of Suffolk the absence of a large consuming population and an inadequate railway infrastructure stalled the burgeoning industry from further expansion.

¹⁴³A.J. Burrows (1882), *Op Cit.*, 12.

¹⁴⁴On heavy clays a judicious use of carefully selected seeds was required. Heavy soils favoured fescues (*Festuca pratensis*, *F. elatior*) and Meadow Foxtail (*Alopecurus pratensis*) while light soils favoured Cocksfoot (*Dactylis glomerata*). Altogether, it was estimated that to achieve a good sward upon 'typical' heavy soils, fourteen different grass types were required. "Epitome" (n.d.) *Epitome of the art of laying down land to permanent and temporary pasture and their subsequent management* 1-2.

¹⁴⁵Suffolk farmers that converted to pasture, particular dairy land around the market towns of the county were to suffer a second psychological blow when the cattle were struck by outbreaks of both foot and mouth disease and pleuro-pneumonia.

¹⁴⁶To a lesser extent modification amongst the crop cultivators of southern and eastern England partially reflected the perceived diminished quality of soil. Farmers that clung to the Lawes supposition that greater production could resolve the depression crisis could have possibly read that the reduced fertility of soils, worn out from increased production levels raised to compensate declining prices.

¹⁴⁷H. Joulie, On Permanent and Temporary Meadows and Pastures, and their fluctuations in the economy of agricultural practice *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 18 (2nd series) (1882) 195-222.

¹⁴⁸O.C.D. Ross, *The Depression in Agriculture and Trade* (London 1885) 9.

¹⁴⁹The figures relating to the decrease in value represented an estimation based on reckoning cattle at £12 per head; sheep at £2 and pigs at £1 10s per head. *The Times* 15 October 1881, col. c, 10 - A Farmer's Plea for Reform (By a Correspondent).

¹⁵⁰George Cooke, a tenant farmer from Clayley Hall, Chester felt that though laying off men made sound economic sense in the short-term, the problem that would eventuate when agriculture would recover is that a labourforce would no longer exist with the villages of England. 'There is not so much labour upon the land now as there used to be, and as there ought to be. Farmers have curtailed expenditure in the way of labour in order to meet the times to a great extent'. G. Cooke (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence c7400-II q22,147.

¹⁵¹R. Lennard, *Economic Notes on English Agricultural Wages* (London 1914) 38.

¹⁵²If the origins of tumbledown land were confused, a standard definition remained equally illusive, though the term was regularly used throughout the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Ironically, it is the statistical evidence that tried to document the extent of abandoned acres that reveals an ambiguity in definition, as evidenced by the problems of different selections of criteria by various investigative officers to the later Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Perry suggests that following the period 1866-1875 the balance of 45% tillage, 11% temporary grass and 44% permanent grass had been re-evaluated at 32/12/56% respectively. By 1913 the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries were confident in their assessment that 338,000 acres had been withdrawn from agriculture altogether. Board of Agriculture and Fisheries (1913) Report on Migration From Rural Districts in England and Wales, 2. P.J. Perry (1974), *Op Cit.*

¹⁵³Much of the land brought into cultivation at the start of the nineteenth-century similarly reverted to pasture during the depression, perhaps reflecting the marginality of newer cultivatable soils for arable production. W.T. Hall, (1922) "One Hundred and Fifty Years Progress in Shropshire Farming" - Supplement to the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* 8 December. Shropshire Local Studies Library (S.L.S.L.) Do4 v.f.

¹⁵⁴J.C. Reynolds (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-III q41,551.

¹⁵⁵Mr J. Looker, a land agent from Huntingdonshire could report that '...a good deal of land in Huntingdonshire and Cambridgeshire has gone down to grass. Half of it is properly laid down, the other half of it is tumbling down'. W.F. Ingram, (1894) Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence c7400-I q3,546 and 3,865; J. Looker, *Op Cit.* q41,203-205.

¹⁵⁶From his own studies across East Anglia, Pringle suggested that much of the land laid down to seed ten years ago bore a direct resemblance to tumbledown land. R.H. Pringle (1894), Supplement to the report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. Assistant Commissioners Report on The Isle of Axholme and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7374, 207-341

¹⁵⁷Ibid.

¹⁵⁸Pringle suggested that an experimental farm be set up in the county to educate farmers on the intricacies of laying down pasture. He notes that a number of farmers attempted to introduce better quality grasses amongst the twitch (*Alopecurus myosuroides*), but the importation once more was suffocated by weeds. Ibid.; H. Pringle, Supplementary to Assistant Commissioners Report - Essex in Relation to the Grass Question.

¹⁵⁹The counties were Dorset, Hampshire, Warwickshire, Cambridge, Hertfordshire, Huntingdonshire, Suffolk, Bedford, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Worcestershire and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence Appendix C. (1896) c8021.

¹⁶⁰Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence Appendix C. (1896) c8021. Report Prepared by Mr J. Looker upon the Counties of Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, Huntingdonshire and Suffolk.

¹⁶¹Ibid.

¹⁶²Arthur Goldsmith's farm at Sapiston, north east of Bury St. Edmunds recorded a serious decline in wheat and barely prices from the early 1880s. The value per acre of wheat on the farm fell from £8 17s 9d in 1883 to £4 7s in 1894 while concurrently barley fell from £9 7s to £4 1s. A. Wilson Fox (1895) Assistant Commissioners Report into the County of Suffolk. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7755, 681-815.

¹⁶³Coppock suggests that the extent of uncultivated land represented a highly variable figure, not least because farms allowed land to be withdrawn from production to avoid tithes and rates, or at least reduce such taxable payments by devaluing the land. J.T. Coppock, Farming in an Industrial Age in A.H.R. Baker and J.B. Harley (Eds) *Man Made the Land* (London 1973).

¹⁶⁴L.J. Rutter (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence c7400-III q34,353.

¹⁶⁵Tumbledown possessed a minimal value for pasture, though it could be employed as a run for stock. R.H. Pringle (1894), Supplement to the report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. Assistant Commissioners Report on The Isle of Axholme and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7374, 207-341.

¹⁶⁶G. Lambert (1897), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression - Final Report, Cd 8540, 204-225.

¹⁶⁷D. Lowenthal and H.C. Prince, English Landscape Tastes *Geographical Review* 55 (1965) 186-222.

¹⁶⁸H.R. Haggard, *A Farmer's Year* (London 1899).

¹⁶⁹One-third of both England's wheat and barley production respectively. E. Whetham, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, Vol. 8 1914-1939 (Cambridge 1978).

¹⁷⁰On the light soils of Suffolk, fields were recorded as heavily blighted with weeds, thistles and carlock, especially in Wangford Union. In this north-eastern district of Suffolk, the fields were described in 1894 as bright yellow with Carlock and containing weeds are prevalent as the actual crop. Significant tracts of grazing land lay as water and couch grass.

171 A. Wilson Fox (1895) Assistant Commissioners Report into the County of Suffolk. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7755, 681-815.

172 H.R. Haggard, *Rural England* 466.

173 S.L. Bensusan, *Latter-day Rural England* (London 1927).

174 '...taking England through, I think I never saw evidences of better cultivation than to be seen in England now, north of the Thames'. A. Pell (1894) Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400-II q17,859.

175 *The Saturday Review* 1881, 675-676.

176 J.R. Fisher, Public Opinion and Agriculture 1875-1900 (unpubl. PhD thesis, University of Hull 1972).

177 *Ibid.* 8

178 G.E. Fussell, Nineteenth Century Farming Encyclopaedias: A Note *Agricultural History* 55 (1981) 16-21

179 The most popular agricultural papers were Farmer's Weekly; The Farmer and The Stockbreeder. C.J. Holmes, Science and the Farmer - The Development of the Agricultural Advisory Service in England and Wales, 1900-1939 *Agricultural History Review* 36 (1988) 77-86.

180 H.H. Smith, Agricultural Depression and Its Remedies *Quarterly Review* 176 (1893) 521-548.

181 J. Haughton, *The Depression of Agriculture with a Proposal for its Remedy* (London 1879) 18.

182 H.H. Smith, Agricultural Depression and Its Remedies *Quarterly Review* 176 (1893) 521-548.

183 *The Times* 25 January 1879, col. f, 10 - The Depression in Agriculture.

184 J.W. Martin (1901), *Op Cit.* 163.

185 This judicious selection process does contradict even a conspectus perusal of non-specialist literature. Martin does, however, concede that amongst the Liberal press there was a tendency to print essays on the plight of the labourer, a subject for Martin amongst many, which was less worthy of attention. J.W. Martin, (1901) *Op Cit.*, 163. Nevertheless, the Liberal press was not the sole publisher of essays and letters on labourers. *The Times* of 21 June 1880 published a letter which attacked the conspicuous lack of representation of the labouring voice at the highest levels of agricultural policy making, a situation which resulted no doubt, in reaction to the upheaval created by the Joseph Arch-led National Agricultural Labourers Union. *The Times* 21 June 1880, col. f, 9.

186 A. Howkins, A Defence of National History, in R. Samuel (ed) *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity* Vol. 1 (London 1989) 23; W.E. Bear, The Public Interest in Agricultural Reform: Part I *Nineteenth Century* 5 (1879) 1074-1091.

187 The exact extent of abandoned land in Essex is unknown and theoretically at least, unobtainable since no one definition of tumbledown, alternatively abandoned land, existed at the time. The figures presented in the anonymously authored paper varied from the anecdotal reports Hunter Pringle collated for his Assistant Commissioners Report for the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression, further confusing comprehension of the physical manifestation of depression.

188 The reasons behind the popularity of the Essex case study are referred to later in this chapter.

189 *The Times* 13 April 1896, col. a, 13 - 'Land Out of Cultivation'.

¹⁹⁰In these days of highly spiced literature local colour and vivid description are almost essential to force an effect'. R.E. Prothero *The Agricultural Depression and the Sufferings of the Clergy* (London 1887) i and 21.

¹⁹¹W.E. Bear, The Revolt of the Counties *Fortnightly Review* 27 (new series) (1880) 720-725.

¹⁹²Bear harangued the press for its *naïveté* and negligence in reporting the start of a phenomenon that was more than just a temporary market blip. To illustrate the point, he even suggested more attention was paid to the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race than farm failure. W.E. Bear, The Public Interest in Agricultural Reform *Nineteenth Century* 5 (1879) 1074-1091.

¹⁹³"Agricola" appeared to have been a tenant farmer who had quit the industry, unable to sustain further financial torment. *The Times* 26 December 1895, col. c, 12.

¹⁹⁴J.W. Martin (1901), *Op Cit.*, 163.

¹⁹⁵Many pages might be filled with quotations from letters, speeches and leading articles set forth in newspapers and periodicals of every shade of opinion, unanimous upon this one point, that farming does not pay interest upon capital, that it is an unremunerative occupation'. Norton was similarly anxious that perpetual doom could 'damage the cause of the suffering farmer by representing farming to be an occupation of such negative results...'. J. Haughton (1879), *The Depression of Agriculture With a Proposal For Its Remedy* (London 1879) 18; *The Times* 3 July 1879, col. f, 7.

¹⁹⁶"Silverstick" (1879), *Op Cit.*, 3.

¹⁹⁷B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London 1983).

¹⁹⁸H. Liversidge (1890), *Op Cit.* 4.

¹⁹⁹The following pages, accordingly, contain little more than a gloomy picture of almost universal disaster'. Morton draws a cross-section of reports from across the country. Removing the usual arable bias, he concluded that pasture-based farmers were equally hit by natural factors such as bad weather. John Chalmers Morton was the editor of the *Agricultural Gazette*. J.C. Morton, *The Past Agricultural Year Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 16 (2nd Series) (1880) 210-249.

²⁰⁰Advice for failing pasture farmers was not so forthcoming.

²⁰¹'At this period every new idea was quickly seized upon and widely discussed'. W.T. Hall, 150 Years of Progress in Shropshire Farming, Supplement to *The Shrewsbury Chronicle* 8 December 1922.

²⁰²C. De Laune Faunce-De Laune, On Laying down Land to Grass *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 18 (2nd series) (1882) 229-235. Many examples of instruction essays can be found in the bibliography to this thesis.

²⁰³H. Joulie (1882), *Op Cit.*

²⁰⁴"Retired Norfolk Farmer", *Agricultural Depression* (Brighton 1879) 3.

²⁰⁵His use of 'advice' is derogatory, as the material in question was not formulated by farmers.

PAGE

NUMBERING

AS ORIGINAL

Chapter Three: Landlordism and the Fabrication of Depression

3.1 Patrician Responsibility and the Hidden Rural Agenda

This section dissects themes and contentions arising from the confluence of landlordism and the spread of agrarian depression. Engagement in the controversies of landed expressions of power and rural social hegemony are not of paramount concern, though these issues contextualise the resultant agrarian debate. In any case David Cannadine and F.M.L. Thompson have discussed an enormous topic at greater length.¹ However, this thesis is concerned with the connection between the establishment of a grass roots representation of depression which was supposed to be ascertained through the investigative work of two Royal Commissions on depression and the degree to which landowners imposed their own judgements on these committees, frequently dressing such ideology up in the language of farming community anxieties. This exploited the reality that farming was too diverse and localised to share diagnoses or prognoses of depression. Farming community opinion did not exist *per se*. To achieve this aim, the section provides a background to various claims made by and against landlords, crucially recognising the heterogeneity of landowners as a group rather than a class, from the aristocratic to village shopkeepers. Territorial power could extend from thousands of acres through to one small holding leased by a village blacksmith or shopkeeper.² The most important section then presents possible evidence of a conscious and unconscious manipulation of the content of depression as interpreted by government-sponsored committee, inaugurated to understand the subject. The reports of the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression (1894-97) were intended to offer the definitive account of depression, and the expectancy surrounding their production concurred with this view.

By re-examining source material such as the reports of the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression, it is contended land owning elites enacted a pivotal role in determining contemporary readings of farm failure by both the agrarian and non-rural public alike, influencing the perceived geography, financial impact and physical outcome of depression. Methods were both explicit and concealed, ranging from excluding the labouring voice from investigative inquiries to control over research content, hence the absence of the land reform resolution in the second Royal Commission final report.³ Indeed, the 'silences' in debate revealed the patriarchal position to the same degree as their stated observations. By situating this manipulation of debate in growing rural unrest, demand for the egalitarian division of land and omnipresent agricultural deficit, it is contended an emergent landlordist urge to protect their social and economic position reformulated the depression into a sympathetic symbolic configuration, emphasizing the link between patrician bankruptcy and

agricultural failure. Thus the popularized reading provided a distorted account of depression that conspired to safeguard aristocratic status. In relation to the broader theme of this chapter, the landlordist opinion effortlessly subsumed the accounts of ordinary farmers within governmental enquiries to become the accepted standard farming narrative.⁴

The political and social validity of a patrician-led rural order in late nineteenth century Britain was hotly disputed.⁵ Hostile views of the *ancien regime*, typified by Joseph Arch or the emergent Socialist movement claimed the continued and coercive presence of landlords suppressed social liberties and strangled innovative ideas to improve domestic agricultural profitability.⁶ An alternative view propounded the imperativeness of patrician support in securing enduring rural stability. Even within these diametrically opposed judgements, nuances recognising the importance of landlord capital existed, yet simultaneously questioning the morality of social control. *Fin de siècle* reaction against modernity and perceived racial degeneracy provided contemporary theoretical credentials to this poly-vocal discourse of rural autonomy. However, the occurrence of depression sharpened debate on the role of landlordism in agricultural fortunes. The calm of the countryside had been disturbed by the rousing call for emancipation from the National Agricultural Labourers Union, but agricultural depression acuminated confrontation further, setting all three economic and social classes on a collision course.⁷ Clemenson believed the landlord-tenant relationship was fundamentally re-evaluated by depression.⁸ At stake was the controlling interest of the countryside, which dependent on class meant securing personal liberty, gaining the freedom to cultivate or maintaining territorial power structures. This section, therefore, aims to determine the subtle expressions of social control within debate and couching them in the associated ideology of landlordism and the critical responses to paternalism and closed villages.

In a rural context, or more specifically, the closed, that is landlord controlled, villages of (southern) England, social relations within the familiar tri-partite hierarchical structure were explicitly ordered around the concept of responsibility, an unwritten code based on similar principles raised earlier in this chapter. This particular convention promoted a sense of duty, wherein the gentry possessed a moral obligation to supervise tenant farmers, who subsequently maintained a responsibility to provide work for the local labouring classes.⁹ Landowners were not necessarily aristocratic individuals. Assistant Commissioner Wilson Fox was convinced from his observations in Suffolk that the smallest landowners had endured the ravages of depression greater than any other farming class.¹⁰ The smallest landowners were perhaps no more than remnants of the old yeoman farming class, possessing an acreage that perhaps supported one or two tenant farmers in addition to the land they farmed themselves. Wilson Fox found this farming class was prone to financial ruin

should tenants go under, because of liability for complete tax evaluations. Perhaps more critically, capital also required investment in keeping the land in a productive state. Roland Prothero was convinced the depression posed a 'formidable danger' to clerical landlordism, another form of tenant-owner relations. He observed farmers on church land had not received an equal disburdening of local taxes that tenants on other landed estates received, causing ill-concealed discontent.¹¹ The colleges of Oxford and Cambridge were also endowed with some of the largest total acreages in Britain. Michael John Jones has very recently noted that the economic consequences of depression affected college capital reserves to the extent that some university readerships could not be funded.¹² He pursues the debate further claiming the depression 'provided an unexpected obstacle to the modernization of higher education in Britain'.¹³ The idea that depression infiltrated issues not immediately connected with the failure of the average tenant farmer, is a theme central to this thesis.

Victorian reformist agendas asserted landlordism no longer served a useful function in the modern industrial capitalist age. Landowners were unable to fund the paternalistic system to the extent experienced during the alleged 'golden age' and this refusal to invest further on drainage schemes or cottage renovation ran concurrent to increasing social agitation. At least this argument holds firm for smaller landowners, a qualification that adds a further degree of spatiality to depression, as certain areas such as Essex contained numerous small landlords that derived no income extraneous to their property. The perceived breakdown of the organic village structure through the claimed impoverishment of landlords supporting a large, insolvent tenantry was in effect a disintegration of paternal obligation. However, the sense that this was a deviation from the natural state of affairs was increasingly queried by those opposed to landlordism.¹⁴ Tenants were forced into cession, leading to a sequence of events that coerced labourers to seek work beyond the countryside, in turn dilating labour costs by augmenting a scarcity value, and thus further constricting the financial margins tenants and ultimately landlords operated within. J.J. Mechi bemoaned the 'great vacating of farms and the ruin or impoverishment of a large number of worthy agriculturalists' as the system of responsibility collapsed.¹⁵ Within the pervading gloom, Roland Prothero could quite plausibly concede growing social unrest rendered English villages 'as inflammable as touchwood'.¹⁶

Conversely, despite this economic and social challenge to their position, the depression presented the patrician class with an opportunity to stabilise a new sympathetic rural ideology that advocated a maintenance of traditional values as the urge for self-preservation fired the landowning aristocracy to reconstitute itself as the benign defender of farm and field. Patriotic responsibility was championed as the aristocracy set itself in opposition to the disruptive rural influence of land reformers.¹⁷ The growing presence of groups interested in rural social justice disclosed the role

depression had played in rendering rural England an ideologically contested sphere. Yet motivations for dominance in rural affairs were based less on altruistic desires to preserve agriculture, the rural mainstay industry, and more upon the recognition of the symbolic place the countryside held in defining national identity, perhaps the most topical debate of the period in response to *fin de siècle* fears of progress and modernity and the emergent English nationalist movement. Landowners were heavily criticised for their role in precipitating depression. Their *raison d'être* was questioned. In reply subtle methods were employed to deflect captious attention such as a dominance of investigative commissions, essays in receptive journals or control of local debate through their patronage of regional agricultural societies.

3.2 Patrician Control in Disquiet England

3.2.1 Landlordism and the Pastoral Ideal

F.L. Soper drew an important distinction between *landownership* and *landlordism*. In theory, all land ultimately belonged to the Crown. Landlords therefore did not possess land, but administered power over a given territory. 'The land itself' claimed Soper, 'only marks the boundary within which this power may be exercised'.¹⁸ Late-Victorian social, political and economic controls within specific locales were assumed to exist without being properly understood. The notion of fealty and bonded labour may have receded by the end of the nineteenth-century, but evidently tenant and labourer fortunes were still tied to the whims and economic largesse of local patriarchs. Improvements to farm structures could be carried out at the landlords expense, a crucial role following conversion to pasture and the need for dairy buildings. Equally, cottage accommodation could remain in an extreme state of dilapidation.

Landlords extracted an income from the land by charging tenants rent. Failure to pay rent led to eviction.¹⁹ When P.J. Perry suggested responses to depression 'may have been controlled by the local landowners', clearly the comment relates to the abatement or even remission of rents to maintain tenant solvency. In keeping rents low, local landlords could retain a degree of rural harmony, placating tenant concerns.²⁰ Local archives are littered with hundreds of examples where landowners got it right, or sometimes spectacularly wrong. Rent remissions were initially temporary measures, typically ranging from between 10% and 20%. Enduring depression ensured their permanence by the late 1880s.²¹ Naturally, the most drastic rental contractions occurred in the most depressed areas such as the Dengie Hundred in Essex. For example, at Cold Norton a 268 acre farm previously assessed at £269 per annum was in 1888 rented for £10. A notable reduction arose at Great Wakering with a farm of roughly 708 acres being rented in 1874 for £750. By 1891 rental

repayments had dropped to £150, in 1893 the figure plummeted to just £50 per annum.²²

The financial backing provided by landlords was a source of stability within the economic turmoil of the late-Victorian countryside. Consequently, Stamper claims a county such as Shropshire, where half the total farm acreage was held by 'great landowners' of over 3,000 acres, did not suffer uncertainty of the magnitude experienced in Essex or Huntingdonshire.²³ Landlords derived an income from fixed capital assets such as buildings, estate property and purchased goods such as farm machinery. Tenants identical to freeholders derived their income from annual profit and loss on farm outputs, which were variable in yield and market price year by year. During the depression incomes slumped until landlords bailed out the tenantry by reducing rents. However, this altruism disguised the fact that if tenants were not required to pay rent but owned the property outright, then their disposable income would be that much greater. "Templar", no patrician apologist, did concede that landlords acted as 'buffers' against the full impact of depression, protecting the tenant class from losing its capital basis by price decline or harvest failure.²⁴

The cultural as opposed to economic notion that rural patriarchs symbolised stability posited an invented tradition upon the late-Victorian countryside. Yet physical evidence from rural England countryside refuted the idea of a durable rural landscape form. Demonstrating that far from the countryside residing in stasis, enclosure and denial of land rights enjoyed under the preceding common land system, had proven to be the greatest disruption to country life. But the agricultural depression laid the countryside open to such ideological appropriation.²⁵ Simultaneous to justifying the need for aristocratic capital in agrarian affairs, the patriarchal order used the opportunity presented by depression to promote the unwritten landlordist responsibility to secure rural stability as its *raison d'être*. In an inspired move, by subtle adjustment to the focus of general inquiry towards the precarious financial position of landed estates, the public gaze drifted from the alleged role the landed elite had played in accentuating depression to nostalgic remembrance of a mythical lost past. By evoking the need to preserve conventional rural stability, patriarchs invented a role that belonged to an English arcadian never-world and only made sense in Victorian idyllic fantasy, bearing no value in the fight against depression. Not for the first time was the economic reality of depression subsumed into the symbolic decline of idyllic England.

John Rennie Short's assumption that dominant environmental ideologies reflect the distribution of power explains the patrician promotion of stability within the culturally constructed English rural idyll, which for urban refugees and anti-modernists alike was probably the only conception of the countryside consumed.²⁶ In reality, most landlords cared little for the mechanisms of farming. That role was left to

the estate agent. Expressions of power and privilege were of greater interest. It was highly probable most landowners failed to comprehend the causes, symptoms and impacts of depression beyond tenant demands for more investment and rental rebates.²⁷ Additionally, Christiana Payne suggests the parallel elevation of rural spiritualism and morality was manipulated to reaffirm the role of the landed gentry against threats posed by the transition to an urban-based industrial economy.²⁸ The naturalness of territorial expressions of power was perceived by aristocrats themselves to be under threat. Contrary to such claims however, Robinson claims a cursory reading of Bateman would reveal the great landowners (holder of over 3,000 acres) attained their greatest possession of land during the early period of depression.²⁹

Through tenurial hegemony, Williamson and Bellamy claim the popular vision of late nineteenth-century rural England maintained the immanence of the English countryside as a private landscape.³⁰ The mental representation of English landed estates exuded separation and exclusion. The country house and park formed the core of the estate with surrounding farmland and the associated issue of depression peripheral. The growing purchase of financially stricken estates by urban *nouveaux riche* strictly for pleasure, heightened the sense that rural England was no longer a working vision.³¹ Though the philosophy of paternalism was no longer actively or explicitly mapped onto the landscape as enclosure had been, the nostalgic celebration of changeless rural England conformed to the patriarchal vision within the imaginary, culturally-consumed realm. Through a conscious recognition of the inability of most Victorians to distinguish between idyllicism and a working rural reality, the role landlords had played and could play in determining the outcomes of depression was couched within a culturally constructed arena that dealt with questions such as territoriality and power and pandered to contemporary fears over the permanence of rural England and social harmony.

3.2.2 The Financial Breakdown of the Paternal System

Landowners throughout the depression were convinced, or were at least reassured, by their estate agents of the need for enduring local guardianship.³² The land agent at Thursfield near Clee Hill, south Shropshire reported that stricken tenants in 1891 demanded allowances on rent to maintain current production levels. Agreement for a 20% allowance was sought and gained. The agent reported back in early 1893 that the tenants 'all expressed themselves as *very grateful* for the allowance made to them'.³³ However, landlords were not ignorant of the consequences should a tenant leave, indeed their hand was more or less forced. Wilson Fox's Assistant Commissioner's Report on Suffolk for the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression recorded local agents commonly advised owners to let their land at low rent, 'sometimes for nothing', rather than possess the farm 'in hand'.³⁴ If a tenant quit before his/her

agreement was up and a replacement could not be found (and by the 1890s attracting farmers ready to commit beyond an annual contract was virtually impossible) then landowners found themselves responsible for the upkeep of the farm. In Suffolk the acreage of land held 'in hand' proved extensive. Thingoe Union contained 13,500 acres, Cosford Union 8,934 acres. At Lavenham, a small parish situated on the heavy land to the north of Sudbury the total 'in hand' land reached 1,240 acres.³⁵ Landowners were dependent upon their estate agents assessments. Indeed landlords represented remote figures from the local tenantry, particularly if the incumbent returned infrequently.³⁶ Baugh and Hill contend that the most effective landlords were those resident upon their estate or at least represented by an efficient land agent. Land agents were responsible for the compilation of estate accounts.

As the agricultural depression persisted, the system of patrician sponsored farming increasingly appeared to break down. Evidence in support of such a contention was forthcoming, usually from landlords. Of critical importance is recognition that landowners varied in territorial power and capital backing. However a number of complaints were forcefully repeated leading Rider Haggard to conclude '...the agricultural depression visited [landowners] last, and will probably leave them last'.³⁷ Roland Prothero similarly concluded the position of small landowners was not to be envied, claiming 'their social position has ceased to be exceptionally dignified or secure'.³⁸

The two biggest concerns arose through the denial of income from firstly, the impossibility of re-letting farms following abandonment of a tenancy agreement and secondly, tenant inability to pay rent both dependably and for the desired amount. Agriculture was recognised as a loss-making industry and farmers were unprepared to sign new tenancy agreements. The problem escalated. Once farms were taken 'in hand' the quality of maintenance, particularly if the farm was previously cereal-based, dropped requiring greater expenditure of capital and effort from a potential incoming tenant. Ultimately when such farms became vacant, owners had great difficulty in leasing the property without substantial rent reductions.³⁹ Landowners were angered that tenant debt restricted business practices. Alfred Burrows wrote that though deductions in rent or tithe rate payments on behalf of tenants appeared insignificant in isolation, extrapolated to include each individual case of failure on an estate lead to a hefty deduction in total receipts.⁴⁰ Indeed even the reduction of rents did not necessarily guarantee against abandoned land. H.E. Moore suggested levels of tenant debt were so bad that even when no rent was paid, adequate capital resources were still lacking to maintain production levels.⁴¹ A real problem was arrear accumulation. Beastall's research on Lord Scarborough's estate in South Yorkshire revealed in 1878, 25% of rent was outstanding. By 1880 this level had risen to 67%, the highest level since the post-Napoleonic War depression.⁴² Yet in many ways rental defaulting was

a problem entirely created by landlords. During the 'Golden Age' rents were repeatedly raised beyond the true value of land in areas where competition for holdings was greatest.⁴³ English suggests the typical national rental increase was between 10% and 30%.⁴⁴ The inevitable reduction in rents therefore appears more severe because of exaggerated rental levels prior to depression.

Rather than address the morality of charging rent to allow tenants to cultivate land that was regarded by contemporary land reform ideologies as their own natural inheritance, Petty-Fitzmaurice and Smith defended the validity of rent, claiming it was only a modest recompense for structural investments in buildings and drainage by landlords. This set the tone for their essay advocating the continued role for patrician control over agrarian finances for the pro-landlord *Quarterly Review*. They proposed previous English farming successes were due to common land enclosure, completed entirely at the landowners expense, conveniently forgetting the gentry were the chief financial beneficiaries of this physical and social upheaval. Somewhat incredulously, Petty-Fitzmaurice and Smith attempted to court public sympathy for the extreme financial pressure under which landlords were placed by trying to maintain an estate, insisting the great landowners of England were 'impoverished'. *Few people have any idea of the annual outlay needed to keep up a large estate, especially if there is a mansion and park, out of which the public will get more enjoyment than the actual owner.*⁴⁵

Many members of the landed elite sold off country properties to refinance the collapsed farming economies of individual estates. At Hawkstone in north Shropshire 16,500 acres were sold in 1912 following Lord Hill's ruination. Conversely, Mr J. Looker suggested to the second Royal Commission on depression, that the absence for landed estates on the property market in severely depressed counties such as Huntingdonshire was because incumbents were convinced there was little prospect of finding a buyer.⁴⁶



Plate 1: Tenant Eviction

3.3 Critical Responses to the Presence of Landlordism

Debates on the morality of rural social control were fired following the publication of John Bateman's 'new Domesday' survey of the territorial extent of landed interests in Britain.⁴⁷ The economic injustices of wealthy landowners demanding money from relatively poor tenant farmers in the form of rent drew censure from agrarianists equal to the clamour from land reformers. For critics such as "Silverstick", culpability for depression rested firmly with landowners, a political rationalization that shunned commonly accepted farming opinion that looked to bad weather, an absence of Protective duties and the rising cost (and declining quality) of labour.⁴⁸ Landowners set rent levels that ultimately burdened tenant farmers with expenditure that could equally have been utilized in keeping farming property financially viable. As a result of such debate, C.F.G. Masterman questioned the ability of the landed gentry to continue in its self-appointed role as guardian of the English rural homeland.⁴⁹

[can]...the landed classes of this country, in any ultimate standard of profit and loss...justify the trust and high calling which has placed the welfare of the rural population in their keeping, and now sees little return but a decaying, deserted countryside.⁵⁰

Capital accumulation at the expense of inward investment was implicated in attacks on the unproductiveness of patrician money, implying but never stating a sense that agriculture was different from other industries in that amassing profit went against an agrarian ethos of producing an essential element to human existence while undertaking a socially responsible role of maintaining rural life. The general anti-landowning position, espoused by an eclectic group ranging from Socialists and land reformers through to the agricultural fundamentalism of writers such as "Silverstick", contended the presence of a landowning class acted as 'ciphers' to agrarian capital to borrow the phrase of "Persimmon", parasitically living off the labour of others.⁵¹ If landlordism proved a diversionary influence on farming fortune, the landlordist policy of *laissez faire* was similarly subjected to criticism for allowing agriculture to stagnate at precisely the moment when innovation was required.⁵²

Capital enabled building repair work, fields to be drained and payment of increased wage demands. By providing fixed capital, tenant farmers relied on the financial support of local landlords, more so when prices were suppressed.⁵³ However, the decreasing economic margin between inputs and outputs faced by tenants led to greater demands for landlord capital assistance which was not forthcoming beyond rent reduction. Landlords equally claimed impoverishment for reasons noted earlier. To compound emerging tenant unrest was a growing realisation, as more imaginative farmers adopted market gardening and cash crop production illustrated, that experimentation required total freedom of cultivation.⁵⁴ Gilbert

Murray, land agent to the Earl of Harrington in Derbyshire, urged for intelligent crop rotations to realise the fertile potential of soils without abrading land. He quoted one example where restricted practices worked against a farmer wanting to obtain superior malting barley by sowing immediately after a wheat harvest, a technique favourable for a healthy yield. Farmers were forced into rigid cropping regimes by ignorant landowners and their estate agents, denying the freedom to adapt, a liberty Murray claimed as 'imperative'.⁵⁵

3.4 Depression, Farming Opinion and the Landlordist Conspiracy

Though it remains an impossible task to determine the exact extent late-Victorian rural debates were controlled by the landed establishment, the issue is not one solely fashioned out of historical curiosity. Claims of a landlordist conspiracy were made as early as 1879 when "Retired Norfolk Farmer" suggested a dominant presence in the House of Lords and a majority in the House of Commons would ensure Parliament looked after patrician concerns.⁵⁶ Motivations were entirely transparent. Faced with growing political challenges to the validity of landed interests on the one hand and rural discontent at the perceived failure to ensure a continued supply of capital on the other, landlords resorted to self-preservation.⁵⁷ Perhaps the most vocal of critics were the two members of Parliament, Francis Allston Channing and George Lambert. Both had been members on the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression (1894-97), but famously dissented from the majority reports for a variety of reasons, not least the dominance of landlordist opinion within the ultimate conclusions.⁵⁸ Their evidence of a conspiracy proved crucial in alerting suspicious anti-landowning minds to actual attempts to manipulate debate.⁵⁹ Fforde contests that faced with a twin challenge of depopulation and depression, landowners could not afford to risk placing faith in legislation inaccurately thought through.⁶⁰ The second Royal Commission and the earlier Richmond Commission presented opportunities for landlords to direct debate towards personal concerns, giving them a considered airing, perhaps even authenticating them as genuine problems of depression. Following the logic of this thesis, any expression of depression can be claimed to be a valid interpretation that determined behaviour and financial outcomes. However, in this situation a problem arises because evidence presented to both Royal Commissions was accepted as farming opinion, which though true in essence, it was not however, the majority view. If postulated that landowners were prepared to state their case in self-preservation, a very real danger exists that the issues raised by their agenda were translated into farming problems when they patently were not, being instead political and ideological questions raised in parallel debates on social justice.

3.4.1 Hijacking the Debate

The primary accusation of hijacking the debate can be directed towards the membership of both the Richmond Commission and the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression chaired by George Shaw-Leferve and secondly the social class of witnesses called. The Richmond Commission was singled out for criticism because too many of the members of the committee were from the same social and agricultural background. Though the division in the witnesses for the second commission favoured tenant farmers, such a figure needs qualification.

Status of Witness	Number of Witnesses
Tenant Farmers	73
Agents	23
Commissioners	18
Landowners	15
Small Holders	6
Members of Parliament	6
Academics*	5
Others†	40

Table 3: The Division in Status Groups with Regard to Witnesses Before the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression (1894-97)

*Academics were enumerated as those stating their academic credentials primarily unlike Prof. J. Long, the former professor of Dairy Farming at the Royal Agricultural College, who was listed as a tenant farmer.

†Others is a broad category that also included auctioneers, land valuers through to various local farming organisation presidents and secretaries. Further contributors to this miscellaneous class included those interested in agricultural affairs, people such as Langford Lovell Price, the Treasurer of Oriel College, Oxford.

Too often the tenant farmers selected to present evidence were untypical of the class they claimed to represent. Firstly many were relatively articulate having received an education of some sort, an experience that differed from most tenantry members. Secondly, the witnesses tended to be local activists for other farming organisations such as the district Chambers of Agriculture. For example Jethro Lousley, a tenant farmer from Berkshire, was a member of the Berkshire and Oxfordshire Chamber of Agriculture, Chairman of the Wantage Board of Guardians and Alderman of Berkshire County Council. John Edwards was a tenant farmer from Cheshire, yet was also a

member of the Agricultural Association and a member of Cheshire County Council. Rather speculatively, engagement in debate that excluded the average tenant farmer meant these farmers could form their opinion from a broader and less spatially constricted source base than conversation at the farm gate. Thirdly some of the farming confessions illustrated spectacularly unsuccessful cases, justifying a call to give evidence, hardly made them representative case studies. Fourthly, the labouring opinion was unheard. Indeed, the labourer is almost erased in all accounts except to be negatively portrayed as a demanding, bothersome figure, one opinion tenants and landowners were united upon.

Early indications of a conspiracy arise from the publication of a second, or interim report, an unprecedented step part way through continuing investigation.⁶¹ The conclusions and publication of a series of minority reports over the issue of agricultural loans, one by the Chairman of the Commission, George Shaw-Lefevre, revealed the division in the investigative body, the controversy arising over excessive exposition of landed interests, addressing landlordist complaints at the expense of equally important issues. The principle conclusions from the second report contended the fall in prices was to blame for distress. This point gained universal approval, as did the belief that land should be unburdened of excessive land taxes and tithes, which were higher in the more depressed counties of southern and eastern England, and invariably met by landowners.⁶² Shaw-Lefevre noted on his tour across Essex that land taxes were higher than anywhere else in England at 1s 9d per acre. The same was true for the tithe rate, claiming 'over wide districts the tithe is considerably more than the rent, and in many cases it has swallowed up the whole of the rent'. In effect, the problem with tithes was more of a landowners issue, because it diverted receipts away from the estate accounts.⁶³ However, the method to resolve this problem, loans for agricultural improvements, proved highly disputable. The idea was that assuming rates could not be lowered, government assistance for improvements would relieve the pressure on the landowner who would not have to sacrifice upgrading farms to afford the rates. Suspicious of the motives behind such conclusions, the minority report to the Second Report, signed by Shaw-Lefevre, Lord Rendel and Robert Giffen disapproved of any state funding that ultimately lined landowners pockets.

*We think that in the case of drainage and other improvements of the same kind...the loans might be made to tenants subject to approval of the works by the Board of Agriculture.*⁶⁴

Nevertheless, Shaw-Lefevre in his report on farming in Essex conceded financial assistance was a necessity, though this should be in the form of relief upon taxes rather than money directed towards improvements.⁶⁵

George Lambert produced his own supplementary report to promote, instead, the need to break up large farms and estates into small holdings, believing state

assistance to such an end 'would yield a far greater return to the general welfare [of rural districts] than the mere propping up of impecunious landlords'.⁶⁶ If the method of resolution proposed by the Second Report hinted at the protection of landlord interests, the unusual step of publishing an interim report without the approval of the chairman also provoked consternation amongst dissenters, fearful that the agenda had been hi-jacked by the publicity of the Commission acting in such an extraordinary fashion, with the source of such action being the production of a distorted report.

For Francis Allston Channing the hijacking of debate was explicit, asserting '[The Royal Commission] is vigorous and uncompromising only in its defence of the existing land system'.⁶⁷ George Lambert, in his separate summary also remarked 'in my view...the [final] report is cast in a landlord mould. The landlord's losses are exaggerated, the tenant's losses minimised'.⁶⁸ The promotion of *laissez faire* over proactive solutions did not conform with success stories such as the Scottish farmers in Essex who were not prepared to wait for crop prices to recover.⁶⁹ Channing clearly displayed antipathy towards the landed classes, attributing full responsibility for the depth of depression, if not the actual initiation of the phenomenon, upon disastrous landlord financial policies that had seen under-investment when profits were up and a reluctance to reduce rents to correspond with the price collapse in arable goods especially. The result was that tenants were unable to raise capital to effectively manage their farms and consequently abandoned holdings altogether or at best neglect maintenance by cutting back on labour.

The basis of Channing's dissenting report revolved around rental agreements, their excessive nature and how landowners manipulated *declining* rents into the major issue to preoccupy the committee.⁷⁰ Payment of rent diverted capital from tenant to landowners, a process in Channing's opinion that meant money flowed from those that required it most to those least in need. Denied working capital, potential production levels proved unobtainable as tenants were forced to lay off labour or adhere to (unprofitable) methods they knew best, fearful of experimentation without capital reserves. The Final Report according to Channing failed to comprehend the problem, not least because tenant farmer criticism of rent was heavily censored. Channing quotes from evidence in Assistant Commissioner John Spiers's report that was withheld.

*Everybody is of the opinion that nothing can rid agriculture of the millstone about its neck so much as a readjustment of rents in accordance with present prices.*⁷¹

Similar evidence from Essex complaining of excessive rents was ignored while R.H. Rew's account of tenant distress in north Devonshire was also excluded from the final conclusions. Channing found it especially telling that one quote from Rew's report claiming 'it was more common to protest against the present rents as excessive, and to

say that landlords ought to reduce them' was ignored.⁷² Grass-roots farming opinion on rent focused on inappropriate charges, yet the conclusions in the Final Report attested to the drop in capital receipts through an enforced reduction in rent as a greater determinant of depression.⁷³ Ignoring moral issues behind the extraction of rent, both arguments were equally valid. The tenant claim of a denial of working capital through out-dated and unrealistic rents does hold true. In a way this reflected the increasing clash between new capital flows in agrarian markets where prices were determined by importation of foreign goods in addition to annual amounts of domestic production and the old semi-feudal system where landlords ultimately influenced tenant farmer income. Similarly, landlord capital was drastically cut following rental abatements which within the patrician sponsored system meant less capital was available for continued investment.

Here lay the chief problem of the Royal Commission. Desperate attempts to assert vested interests and illustrate the depth of distress to a largely unimpressed Parliament meant cases were detailed and recorded without emotional detachment. At few points does the committee step back from the circularity of arguments outlined above to suggest independent farming could offer the capital and cultivation freedom required to resolve depression. The problem here is the assertion of a redefined rural economic infrastructure proposed by small holdings ebbed from representing an agricultural issue to become a social question. The behaviour of aristocratic landlords in particular suggested an unwillingness to concede social control in the locale, while similarly tenant farmers in closed villages lacked the independent spirit to act outside the landlord-tenant system. Rather than unifying disparate claims within the nebulous farming community, a product of the multitude of geographies, both real and imagined, the Commission exhibited the hostility and distrust that prevented fabrication of a 'grand plan' so many farmers and landowners strived for.

Though the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression became the chief focus of bias claims, another source scrutinized for evidence of establishment interests was the earlier Richmond Commission, the first national-level attempt to define depression. George Brodrick delivered the most damning assessment of the commission's failures following its conclusion in 1881.⁷⁴ He drew significance from 'silences' in certain debates on contentious issues that portrayed landowners in a less propitious light. Brodrick similarly felt the issue of rents and the initial reluctance of landowners to reduce levels had been examined with 'amusing reserve'.⁷⁵ During the first wave of depression farmers believed rent levels were still set at pre-depression amounts reflecting the prosperity of the earlier age. Landowners were reluctant to reduce rent levels, but when forced by the prospect of tenant bankruptcy, the drop appeared hefty, creating an illusionary sense of failure when in reality the sharp fall in prices advanced a superior indicator of the economic nature of depression.⁷⁶

However, disregarding their own sluggish response with rental rebatements, landowners deflected blame onto 'improvident competition' of tenants during the so-called 'Golden Age'. This vague and unsubstantiated statement appears to have possessed two connotations. Firstly, a shortage of opportunities to secure tenancy agreements forced rents up as available leases acquired a scarcity value. Secondly, tenant farmers were implicated for overstressing themselves, demanding investments in drainage and construction they could not afford when costs were passed on in the form of increased rents as landowners recouped capital raised for improvements. Yet too often, the greater profits obtained as a result of improvement did not cover the associated rent rise and thus tenants found themselves accumulating an ever expanding debt burden.⁷⁷ Brodrick berated the 'lame' conclusion from the Commission that greater effort to seek sensible agreements between both parties was required.⁷⁸ In reality, until landowners were later faced with the collective threat of numerous broken tenancy agreements, tenants had little or no bargaining power because of a reliance on landowning capital and when larger landowners were involved, the probability of social coercion and a general reluctance to upset local convention quelled tenant unrest.

With equal adroitness, the final report of the Richmond Commission shifted causal blame from rents to rates, declaring 'the low price of agricultural produce, beneficial as it is to the general community lessens the ability of the land to bear the proportion of taxation which has therefore been imposed upon it'.⁷⁹ The issue of tax creates from an historical perspective two separate issues. Firstly, rates were implicated over rents as the real cause for the proportional increase of demands on tenant farmer income. This obscured rental overcharging for the privilege to farm. Brodrick estimated regardless of the increased value of property following improvements, rents since the Crimean War had been raised over the expected increase by £5,000,000 per annum, all of which lined landowners pockets.⁸⁰ Calculation of such figures was arbitrary and estimations were carefully worked to suit the argument. Nevertheless, the amount constituted a serious diversion of cash away from relieving depression. Additionally, total anticipated rise in rural rates over the same period amounted to £3,600,000 per annum, nearly £1.5 million less than extortionate rents. Pursuing Brodrick's persuasive financial argument, the reality was farmers were penalised by excessive rents. Secondly, landowners had their own concerns about paying exorbitant tax amounts, especially on sporting land. Baron Stanley of Alderley felt it was unjust that game land which was already subjected to normal rural rates faced the prospect of being taxed because of its utilization for leisure purposes, despite the immorality of denying access to land that could perhaps be used by small holders returning from city-life.⁸¹

By the initiation of the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression, land reform was at the centre of political debate. Through figures like Jesse Collings, the

possibility of small holdings as a solution to depression had been raised and a select committee was organised accordingly in 1889.⁸² Yet the Royal Commission paid scant attention to the most popular contemporary rural subject, disregarding Dairy farming, another popular alternative route out of a cycle of depression was also neglected. An unnamed supporter of dairy interests complained membership of the Richmond Commission favoured southern arable producers, which meant viable solutions were denied a hearing.

*If we are to believe the successful future of British agriculture...to be found in butter and cream or soft cheese manufacture, surely this important interest should have found its representative.*⁸³

The added affect of an arable bias was that the final reports resembled dirge-like lists of agrarian decay and failure, offering little in the way of positive solutions or the much anticipated 'grand solution'.⁸⁴

3.4.2 The Implications of Patrician Vocality

Both investigative commissions were charged with ascertaining the causes, nature and extent of depression. The remit extended to establishing the possibility of a resolution to depression through legislation or other similar proactive measures. The Richmond Commission represented the first attempt to collate farming opinion from across the British Isles. In the absence of an effective nation-level structure to accumulate agrarian information on depression, the findings of the Royal Commission of 1894-97 also revealed a diverse range of farming opinion. Clearly the Richmond Commission had done little to unify interpretations of failure from within the industry during the intervening period because issues such as Protection, tax relief and rents were raised for a second time. If farmers had sought hard evidence on the geographical distribution of depression they were disappointed. Despite the methodical investigations of Assistant Commissioners, the Final Report of the Royal Commission tended to focus on extreme failure.⁸⁵ Tenant farming opinion proved preferable to over owner occupancy views, despite the increasing popularity of the yeoman farming idea. If the examples used proved unrepresentative, the language and subject matter of debate were not typical of the plodding localism of most farming prognoses, addressing complicated economic theories such as bi-metalism and the role of currency in the diminution of farm product prices. In reality, both committees did not confront tenant farming concerns such as the rent burden. The labour perspective was almost totally ignored. The reports of both commissions were clearly intended for Parliamentary eyes, quite understandably because they were governmental bodies. The problem with national-level investigative remits was a simplification of debate by generalised statements. In the process the acute spatiality of depression is lost and the phenomenon remains open to mythologisation, distortion and ideological

appropriation. As the Royal Commission reports were government sponsored material, the conclusions were respected, especially beyond agriculture.

An important distinction needs to be made between evidence heard, material collected by Assistant Commissioners and the final reports. Through the first two media, tenant farming views were vocalised. However, as Channing and Lambert reveal in their dissenting reports, this evidence was often ignored in the compilation of reports. Though as historians and historical geographers we can search the minutes of evidence to establish typical agrarian sentiments, it was the committee reports that were publicised and reported on in the press and most crucially, influenced governmental action. Lambert was concerned therefore that the press had been excluded from daily hearings and that the proceedings were denied publicity, heightening the sense of a conspiracy to censor material.⁸⁶

Regardless of the numerous biases listed in the process of collation, synthesis and conclusion, the biggest cause for concern was that committee conclusions had been manipulated to serve implicit establishment narratives of self-interest dressed up as farming issues. The most obvious example, and one that has been focused on here, was the issue of rent which was contorted from a tenant complaint regarding unaffordable levels into a landlordist protest at their own declining capital margins. Though the final recommendations were indisputably agrarian, they did not always address more mundane farming concerns, the issues that interested average tenant farmers. However, for critics like Channing and Lambert, the problem of a possible landlordist conspiracy proved more troublesome. The committees were government sponsored, presenting an opportunity for landlordist views to be legitimated. The process is particularly artful. By presenting cases of failure on all types of farming, arable or pasture, tenant or freehold, the depth of distress and the need for external governmental intervention is publicised. However, to promote the invented tradition of stability through paternalism, examples of failure on tenant holdings were contrasted favourably with the extreme despair of small owner occupied holdings in southern Lincolnshire, an area with a long tradition of freeholds.

To a degree, the lack of any real substantive legislation arising from either commissions and the denial of media coverage during the collation of material does not detract from the committees as important, though flawed, bodies of evidence. Both Commissions were attempts to establish definitive versions of depression, thus authenticating as 'real' the evidence collected and conclusions reached. In terms of historical research, no study of depression, be it econometric or otherwise can ignore the vast wealth of official publications. However, using the resource to reconstruct an historical geography in 'real' space becomes impossible because of the deeply submerged narratives examined here, validating the assertion of rural England as a series of ideological constructions.

¹D. Cannadine, *Aspects of Aristocracy: Grandeur and Decline in Modern Britain* (London 1994); F.M.L. Thompson Landowners and the Rural Community in G.E. Mingay (Ed) *The Unquiet Countryside* (London 1989).

²In many ways this represents a critical difference in that though landowners of all sizes determined the life-chances of farmers across Britain, in reality it was the aristocratic or politically active that shaped broader discourses on agricultural depression.

³One of the motivating factors behind the inclusion of a chapter on small holdings in this thesis is to demonstrate that actual debate on depression ranged much wider than discussion on the merits of rental reduction or the enormity of estate losses.

⁴Typically when MacCleod remarks that agriculture is being 'taxed to death' it is less the farmers and labourers *per se*, and more the landowners. R. MacCleod, Agriculture Taxed to Death *Blackwoods Magazine* 156 (1894) 118-128.

⁵F.M.L. Thompson, Landowners and the rural community, in G.E. Mingay (Ed) *The Unquiet Countryside* (London 1989) 80.

⁶Restrictive practices imposed by estate agents represented a constant source of complaint from tenant farmers because they were given limited opportunity to experiment. In reality, though supervision of building projects were strictly controlled, cultivation largely went unregulated though most tenancy agreements contained conditions that ensured land would not be mistreated or allowed to degenerate into tumbledown, thus depreciating the value of land that 'belonged' to the landlord. P. Kropotkin, *Agriculture* (London 1896).

⁷Roger Magraw noted a similar friction in France between tenants and landowners developed, usually over the issue of land rents as financial margins were comprised by price decreases. He reports that rents fell in the Loir-et-Cher region by up to 44%, in line with some the greatest abatements in Britain. Equally, the landowners hand was forced by a rural exodus that rendered abandoned tenancy agreements almost impossible to replace. R. Magraw, *France 1814-1915 - The Bourgeois Century* (London 1983) 324.

⁸'Faced with economic hardship, tenants were forced to take a stronger stand and bargain for rent reductions or quit their farms altogether.' H. A. Clemenson, *English Country Houses and Landed Estates* (London 1982).

⁹Naturally, it must be recognised that this model discounts the large, and overwhelmingly northern English and Celtic farmers that were owner occupiers, usually residing in open villages.

¹⁰A. Wilson Fox (1895) Assistant Commissioners Report into the County of Suffolk. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7755, 681-815.

¹¹'...the connection of the clergy with the land has created a widespread discontent, and that this discontent is in a large measure due to the impression that the clergy have neither borne their fair share of agricultural distress, nor done their utmost to raise the burdens under which landed interests have collapsed'. R. Prothero, *The Agricultural Depression and the Suffering of the Clergy* (London 1887) 10.

¹²Jones's work follows on from an earlier debate between Dunbabin and Engel over the experiences of various colleges. Dunbabin claimed that the larger colleges at Oxford, such as Christ Church and Magdalene were able to extract incomes from beyond agricultural rentals. Newer colleges such as Hertford were not so fortunate. M.J. Jones, The Agricultural Depression, Collegiate Finances and the Provision for Education at Oxford, 1871-1913 *Economic History Review* 50 (1997) 57-83; J.P.D. Dunbabin, Oxford and Cambridge College Finances, 1871-1913 *Economic History Review* 28 (1975) 631-47; A. Engel, Oxford College Finances, 1871-1913: a comment *Economic History Review* 31 (1978) 437-45; L.L. Price, The Colleges of Oxford and Agricultural Depression *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 57 (1895) 36-74.

¹³M.J. Jones (1997), *Op Cit.*

¹⁴P. Kropotkin (1896), *Op Cit.*

¹⁵*The Times* 1st January 1880 col. c, 12 - Note on English Agriculture in 1879: Letter to the Editor by J.J. Mechi.

¹⁶'If once resistance takes hold on a county it will spread like wildfire'. R.E. Prothero (1887), *Op Cit.*

¹⁷'Landlords are doubtless responsible to the nation for the way in which they use their power...' F.L. Soper, *Landlordism: What is it; what is does and what should be done about it* (n.d.) 3.

¹⁸F.L. Soper (n.d.), *Op Cit.* 3.

¹⁹ A source of further research work could be examining when the ideological transition took place from eviction to outright desperation to keep tenant farmers on their holding.

²⁰R.J. Thompson defined rent as 'the share of the produce taken by the landlord for the use of the soil and for the equipment of the farm'. R.J. Thompson, An Enquiry into the Rent of Agricultural Land in England and Wales in the Nineteenth-century *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 70.

²¹Druce, S.B.C. (1881) Report of the Assistant Commissioner of the Eastern Counties. c7374.

²²R.H. Pringle (1894), Supplement to the report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. Assistant Commissioners Report on The Isle of Axholme and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7374, 207-341.

²³P. Stamper, *The Farmer Feeds Us All* (Shrewsbury 1990).

²⁴A few years after "Templar's" observation Charles Masterman found cases where old rural workers lamented the passing of the landed gentry, particularly as the ruthless capitalism of new large farmers took over the management of the countryside. "Templar", *Agricultural Distress and the Royal Commission* (London 1879) 24; C.F.G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* (London 1909) 150.

²⁵'It is the capitalist who has gradually given to the soil of England its present character and appearance and to whose outlay the nation is indebted for its great fertility and productiveness'. H.C.K. Petty-Fitzmaurice and H.H. Smith, Landed Incomes and Landed Estates *Quarterly Review* 166 210-239.

²⁶J.R. Short, *Imagined Country: Environment, Culture and Society* (London 1991) 55.

²⁷J.R. Fisher, *Op Cit.*

²⁸Perceived threats included merchants, manufacturers and the urban middle-classes. C. Payne, *Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England, 1780-1890* (London 1993). The challenge posed by modernism implicated the landed estate as the last bastion of semi-feudalism.

²⁹G.M. Robinson, *Agricultural Change: Geographical Studies of British Agriculture* (Edinburgh 1988) 19. J. Bateman, *The Great Landowners of Great Britain* (London 1883).

³⁰T. Williamson and E. Bellamy, *Property and Landscape - A Social History of Land Ownership and the English Countryside* (London 1987).

³¹Short proposes that though the English countryside was made through work and utilization, the idea of idyllicism and repose obliterated any sense of effort. B. Short, Image and realities in the English rural community: an introduction in B. Short (Ed) *The English Rural Community: Image and Analysis* (Cambridge 1992) 3.

³²H.A. Clemenson, *Op Cit.*

³³Reference to Depression in letters from the Silvington agent, Thursfield 1891-1905. S.R.O. 3075/3/1-31.

³⁴Wilson Fox reported that in the Cosford Union of Suffolk 'nearly every village and hamlet had an area of land farmed involuntarily by landowners'. A. Wilson Fox (1895) Assistant Commissioners Report into the County of Suffolk. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7755, 681-815.

³⁵At Tuddenham parish in the north west of Suffolk, an 1895 field book records a massive 1,458 acres 'in hand'. Anon. A West Suffolk Estate Field Book (1895) Suffolk Record Office HA 507/3/841. A. Wilson Fox (1895) Assistant Commissioners Report into the County of Suffolk. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7755, 681-815.

³⁶The Essex case study demonstrates, the land agent controlled certain budgets such as money lend for repairs, the degree of rental abatement and so on. H.E. Broughton notes that on the largest estates, detailed bureaucratic accounting systems were put in place with separate accounts for buildings and repairs, gardens, drainage and woodland. G.C. Baugh and R.C. Hill, *Agriculture 1750-1875 in Victoria County History of Shropshire*. Vol. 4. (London 1989). H.E. Broughton, *Family and Estate Records in the Leicestershire Records Office* (Leicester 1984).

³⁷H.R. Haggard (1902), *Op Cit*. Vol. II. 543.

³⁸R. Prothero, *The Agricultural Depression and the Sufferings of the Clergy* (London 1887) 1.

³⁹W.T. Carrington, The Advantage of Converting Cold Clay Arable Land into Permanent Pasture and the Best Method for Doing It *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 15 (2nd series) (1879).

⁴⁰The book was developed from a number of themes Burrows had raised in the *Journal of Forestry and Estate Management*. A.J. Burrows, *The Agricultural Depression and How to Meet it: Hints to Landowners and Tenant Farmers* (London 1882) 8.

⁴¹H.E. Moore, The Revival of Farming *Contemporary Review* 65 (1894) 58-74.

⁴²T.W. Beastall, A South Yorkshire Estate in the Late Nineteenth-century *Agricultural History Review* 14 (1966) 210-245.

⁴³English records one such example as the Sledmere estate on The Wolds in eastern Yorkshire. Mixed farming units which recorded the largest profits also received higher rates of rental increase. B. English, On the eve of the Great Depression: the economy of the Sledmere estate 1869-1878 *Business History* 24 24-47.

⁴⁴*Ibid*.

⁴⁵H.C.K. Petty-Fitzmaurice and H.H. Smith *Op Cit*.

⁴⁶Mr J. Looker. Minutes of Evidence. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression (1894) Cd7400-IV, q41,383.

⁴⁷P.H. Lindert, Who Owned Victorian England?: The debate over landed wealth and inequality *Agricultural History* 61 27-49.

⁴⁸"Silverstick" was convinced that a landlordist dominated Parliament, a deviation from the normal claim of Parliament to be urbanist in outlook, was ignorant on matters of farming distress, consequently failing to recognise the economic and symbolic importance of agriculture. His claim made in 1879 was that landlords had conspired to conceal the true nature and depth of depression and that the Government should undertake 'to collect facts and statistics, unconcerned such a proposal could potentially lead to the outright publication of landlordist aims through the setting of any investigative agenda. "Silverstick", *What Shall We Do? A treatise on the Present Agricultural Depression, its causes, effects and remedies* (Bishop's Stortford 1879) 3.

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- ⁴⁹Masterman once again confuses the financial aspect of depression with the threat to a culturally fabricated environment.
- ⁵⁰C.F.G. Masterman (1909), *Op Cit.* 53.
- ⁵¹"Persimmon" *Op Cit.* 52.
- ⁵²F.A. Channing, *The Truth About Agricultural Depression* (London 1897b).
- ⁵³J.P.D. Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London 1974).
- ⁵⁴E.H. Lushington attached importance to the practical freedom of cultivation. Lushington was the Treasurer of Guy's Hospital. The hospital was a major landowner in Essex. Other similarly enlightened approaches by landowners were published in the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. William Harrison, a tenant farmer from Hutton's Ambo in Yorkshire felt he had achieved superior results on his land than neighbours on other estates because the freedom of cropping and freedom of sale of produce he exercised. E.H. Lushington. Minutes of Evidence. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. (1894) c7400-I, q1,290-92.
- ⁵⁵G. Murray, *Agricultural Depression: Its Causes and Remedies* (London 1879) 4.
- ⁵⁶'...landlords can easily look after their own interests, and which they will probably proceed to do in the event of their pockets beginning to suffer the loss of a part of their present income, more especially if the same threats became chronic'. "Retired Norfolk Farmer", *Agricultural Depression* (Brighton 1879) 15.
- ⁵⁷J. Long, The British Farmer and the Deluge of Foreign Produce *Fortnightly Review* 54 (new series) (1893) 184-193.
- ⁵⁸Fourteen of the sixteen commissioners signed the Final Report. The two who would not put their signature to either the Final Report or the Minority Report included therein were Channing and Lambert. F.A. Channing, *The Commission on Agriculture Fortnightly Review* 62 (new series) (1897a) 459-463; F.A. Channing, *The Truth About Agricultural Depression: an economic study of the evidence of the Royal Commission* (London 1897b); G. Lambert, Report by Mr George Lambert. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression Final Report. Cd8540 204-225.
- ⁵⁹Channing was convinced people reading the Final Report of the Royal Commission would be able to decipher the real reasons for failure behind the landlordist conspiracy. 'The evidence supplies as no previous body of evidence has ever done, full materials for an exhaustive analysis of the real mischiefs which have paralysed agriculture'. F.A. Channing (1897b), *Op Cit.* xii.
- ⁶⁰M. Fforde, *The Conservative Party and Real Property in England 1900-1914* (unpubl. D.Phil Thesis, University of Oxford 1971) 31.
- ⁶¹Supplementary Report Signed By George Shaw-Leferve, Lord Rendel, Sir Robert Giffen and George Lambert. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Second Report. (1896) c7981, 21.
- ⁶²Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Second Report. (1896) c7981, 8.
- ⁶³'There are many farms where the tenants pay £5 or £10 only more than the tithe, and where, consequently the landlords, after paying the land-tax and the cost of repairs, get less than nothing'. Report by G. Shaw Leferve. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence Appendix J. (1896) c8021, 614.
- ⁶⁴Minority Report by the Chairman (Mr George Shaw-Leferve), Lord Rendel and Sir Robert Giffen. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Second Report. (1896) c7981, 22-31.
- ⁶⁵Report by G. Shaw Leferve. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence Appendix J. (1896) c8021, 614.

⁶⁶Report by Mr George Lambert. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Second Report. (1896) c7981, 55-56.

⁶⁷F.A. Channing (1897b), *Op Cit. xi*.

⁶⁸G. Lambert, Report by Mr George Lambert. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression Final Report. Cd8540 204-225.

⁶⁹'If it has a real policy anywhere, it is that things must be left to take care of themselves'. F.A. Channing (1897b), *Op Cit. xi*.

⁷⁰Lambert once again was in agreement with Channing. 'Rent is regarded as sacred, and insufficient reductions of rent are carefully ignored'. G. Lambert (1897), 204; F.A. Channing, Report by F.A. Channing. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Final Report. Cd8540 225-370.

⁷¹Ibid. 234.

⁷²Ibid. 234; 'The report by exaggerating the losses of the landowners, seeks to divert attention from the undoubted fact that tenant farmers are suffering under a burden of excessive rents'. G. Lambert (1897), 206.

⁷³'...there is a disposition to measure depression by the actual reduction in rents, or, in other words, to treat it solely as a *landlords question*'. F.A. Channing, Report by F.A. Channing. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Final Report. Cd8540 229.

⁷⁴G.C. Brodrick, State and Prospects of British Agriculture in 1882 *Fortnightly Review* 32 (new series) (1882) 608-624.

⁷⁵John Clay, a member of the Richmond Commission claimed in a Supplementary Memorandum that the Final Report 'does not sufficiently deal with the increase of rent' as a propagating factor behind depression. Supplementary Memorandum by Mr John Clay. Report from H.M. Commissioners on Agriculture (1882) c3309, 39-42.

⁷⁶The illusion lies in the previously over-charged rent levels. In real economic terms the drop was less significant.

⁷⁷The issue was still unresolved when the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression was convened in 1894. Channing declared 'rents...by the fall of prices, lost their economic basis, and now assign to the landlord a wholly unfair proportion of the proceeds of the land'. F.A. Channing, Report by F.A. Channing. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Final Report. Cd8540, 227.

⁷⁸The naiveté of such an approach was reflected upon some years later by George Lambert who found that despite intentions to ensure greater equality between tenants and landowners to share the burden of rural land taxes, tenants were losing out. Landowners were not bound to share any increases in rates following farm improvements, thus saddling the tenant with the extra burden. Such penalising of the tenant discouraged investment which was required if farming was to become more competitive. G. Lambert, Report by Mr George Lambert. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression Final Report. Cd8540 204.

⁷⁹Rates included highway rates, county rates, rural sanitary rates etc. Supplementary Memorandum by Mr John Clay. Report from H.M. Commissioners on Agriculture (1882) c3309, 1-42.

⁸⁰In short, following rises in land value, rental levels were expected to rise accordingly. This happened, but the new rents were increased further by landowners adding supplemental increments over and above the expected levels.

⁸¹H.E.J. Stanley, Radical Theorists on Land *Fortnightly Review* 37 (new series) (1885) 297-308.

⁸²The work of Collings and the conclusions of the select committee will be discussed at greater length in a later chapter.

⁸³*The Times* 26 August 1879, col. f, 8.

⁸⁴'The agricultural Commission may have disappointed those who put their faith in revolutions or panaceas.' F.A. Channing (1897b), *Op Cit.* xi.

⁸⁵Contrary to this claim was an assertion from W.E. Bear, written before all the individual reports of the Assistant Commissioners were published, that in fact the Royal Commission was attempting to diffuse the depth of distress by initially publishing two reports from the least affected areas of England, the Garstang district of Lancashire and Frome in Somerset. W.E. Bear, *Perish Agriculture Quarterly Review* 180 (1895) 406-430.

⁸⁶G. Lambert (1897), 204.

Chapter Four: The Depression in Essex

4.1 The 'most depressed' county in England

In 1894 R. Hunter Pringle, an Assistant Commissioner of the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression submitted cartographic evidence in association with his report that helped secure Essex the dubious recognition as the classically depressed English county.¹ His exposure of distress in the Dengie Hundred, a lowland mixed farming district of East Essex between the Blackwater and Crouch rivers, long recognised amongst local farmers as the locale displaying the worst aspects of decline, applied national signification to the area as the clearest example of agricultural depression in its most extreme form.² Further confirmation of Essex as the classically depressed English county comes from a special report submitted by George Shaw-Leferve, chairman of the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression, that concentrated on Essex agriculture, making special reference to the dreadful statements of distress that appeared in Pringle's report.³ Charles Masterman on a tour through Essex found the agrarian landscape had declined in direct proportion to the local farming spirit.

*In rural Essex another observer finds the land becoming 'one vast wilderness', a 'retreat for foxes and a shelter for conies': with the houses tumbling into decay, no new houses built, apathy settling down like a grey cloud over all.*⁴

Perry affirms the area around Maldon, famed for its derelict land and poor pasture, as the core of national depression, adding credence to any geographical description in real space of farm failure as a southern phenomenon.⁵ Pringle's production of a map of derelict land in the Dengie and Maldon area was swiftly appropriated as lucid evidence of the physical extent of depression. (Figure 2) The relentless misfortune perceived by farmers was figuratively played out when the area was devastated by a saltwater flood on 29 November 1897. Crops were damaged, but more forebodingly, heavy inundation precipitated a further deterioration in soil conditions.⁶ Construed as indicative of the depressed state of farming across the whole of Essex, which as the title of the map suggested ('Map of the District Between Chelmsford, and the Blackwater in the North and the London, Tilbury and Southend Railway in the South') it patently was not, Pringle's map achieved even greater investment of symbolic meaning, its famous 'blackened portions' mediating the moribund state of agriculture.⁷ Subsequent historical work on the depression has employed the map to not only make generalisations about the depth of depression in Essex, but also Britain generally.

The map is a powerful text that can and should be deconstructed of its multi-layered codes.⁸ It constitutes an important iconographic artefact of the period, rich in

metaphors for issues such as rampant degeneracy, neglect and the enmeshing of farmers within a landscape of dereliction and abandonment. It also lends graphic support to the repeated lament of English farmers that agriculture no longer paid. Depression may have possessed a basis in hard economic reality, yet it is the symbolism of obliteration extruded from the map. Readings of the symbolic cartographic content were/are heavily dependent on personal bias. A member of the pro-farming lobby would contend the distribution of tumbledown testified to the unprofitability of farming. To less sympathetic eyes, the map signified the ineptitude of the Essex farmer.

The fashion to reference Pringle's map was encouraged by two factors: firstly, the graphic use of 'blackened portions' to visualize depression and secondly its uniqueness as a cartographic attempt to explain depression. The use of black ink to demarcate formerly arable land lying as 'coarse weedy pasture' was enforced by print reproduction, yet it performs an unintended function that heightens the sense of expiration. The portions could quite readily be interpreted as voids, stripped both of people and productive value. Their darkness contrasted with the lightness and vivacity of the rustic idyll. Pringle's map gained prominence by representing the first and quite probably only significant attempt to map depression. No other maps were included within the Assistant Commissioners reports and future cartographic statements such as the county outlines utilized by Haggard in *Rural England* were compiled at too general a scale to offer detailed comment on the spatiality of depression. Therefore reference to the map was largely based upon its curiosity value and its availability for application as part of an official governmental report, this last point conferring added gravitas.

Essex represents a well-worn case study.⁹ Yet this sense of the county as a microcosm of depressed rural England makes further investigation enticing. Interplay between national assumptions and local cogitation remained obscured in previous historical study. The idea of a microcosm suggests contemporary intellectual interpretations of failure were reducible to a parochial level. What the Essex case study reveals is the ambiguities of national-level conceptual constructions of rural England did not translate with the required high resolution to embrace the infinite local possibilities extant within the English village.

Essex offers numerous examples of classic manifestations of depression, both material and psychological. It possessed contrasting fortunes governed by physical geographic factors. Soil types varied between dry, workable classes and stodgy clays. Some were precariously balanced in responsiveness to new pasture within a traditionally arable area. Conversion practices were also closely scrutinised. High failure rates following transformation left Essex farmers exposed to criticism. Of additional interest, Essex received large numbers of immigrant farmers from

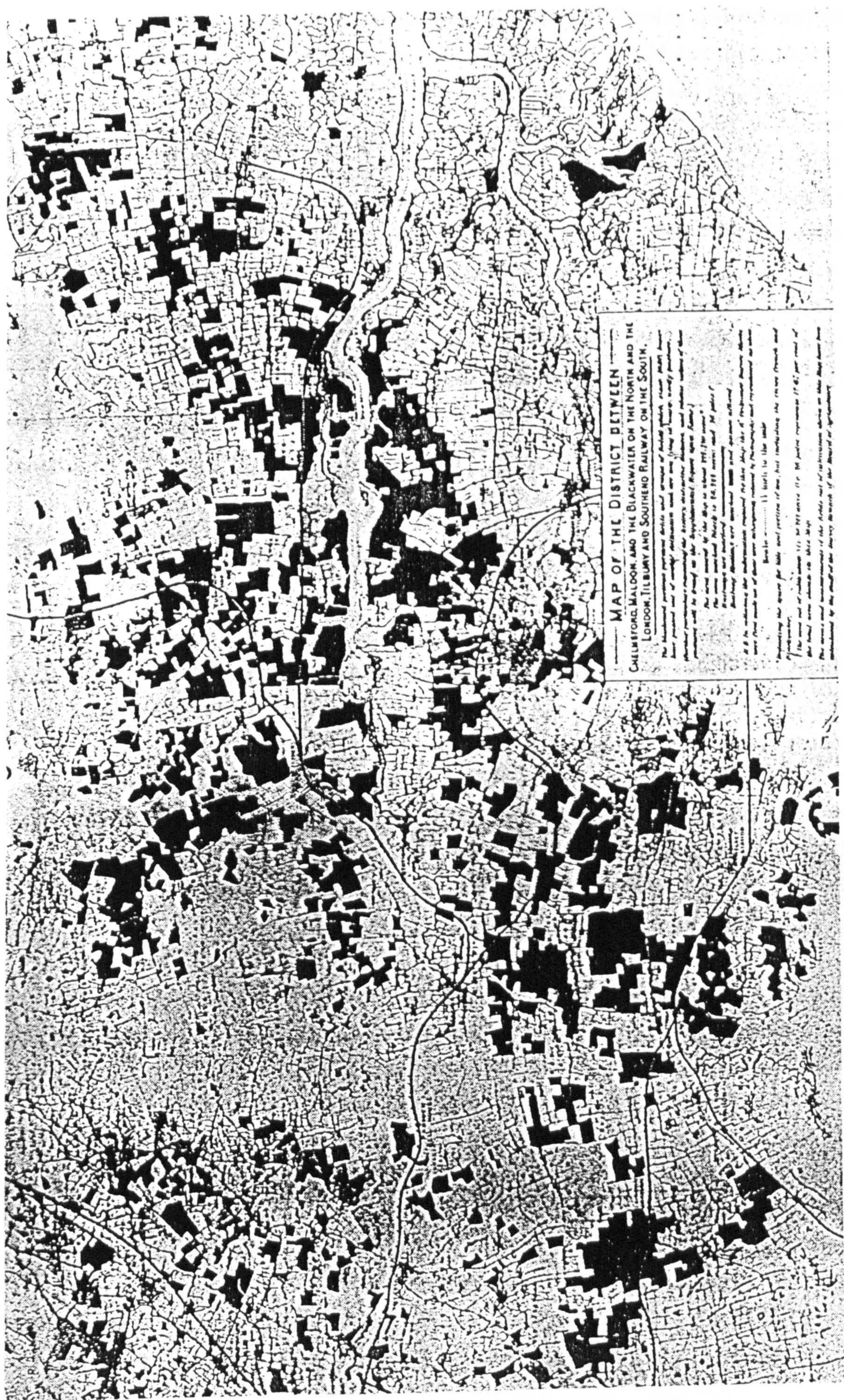
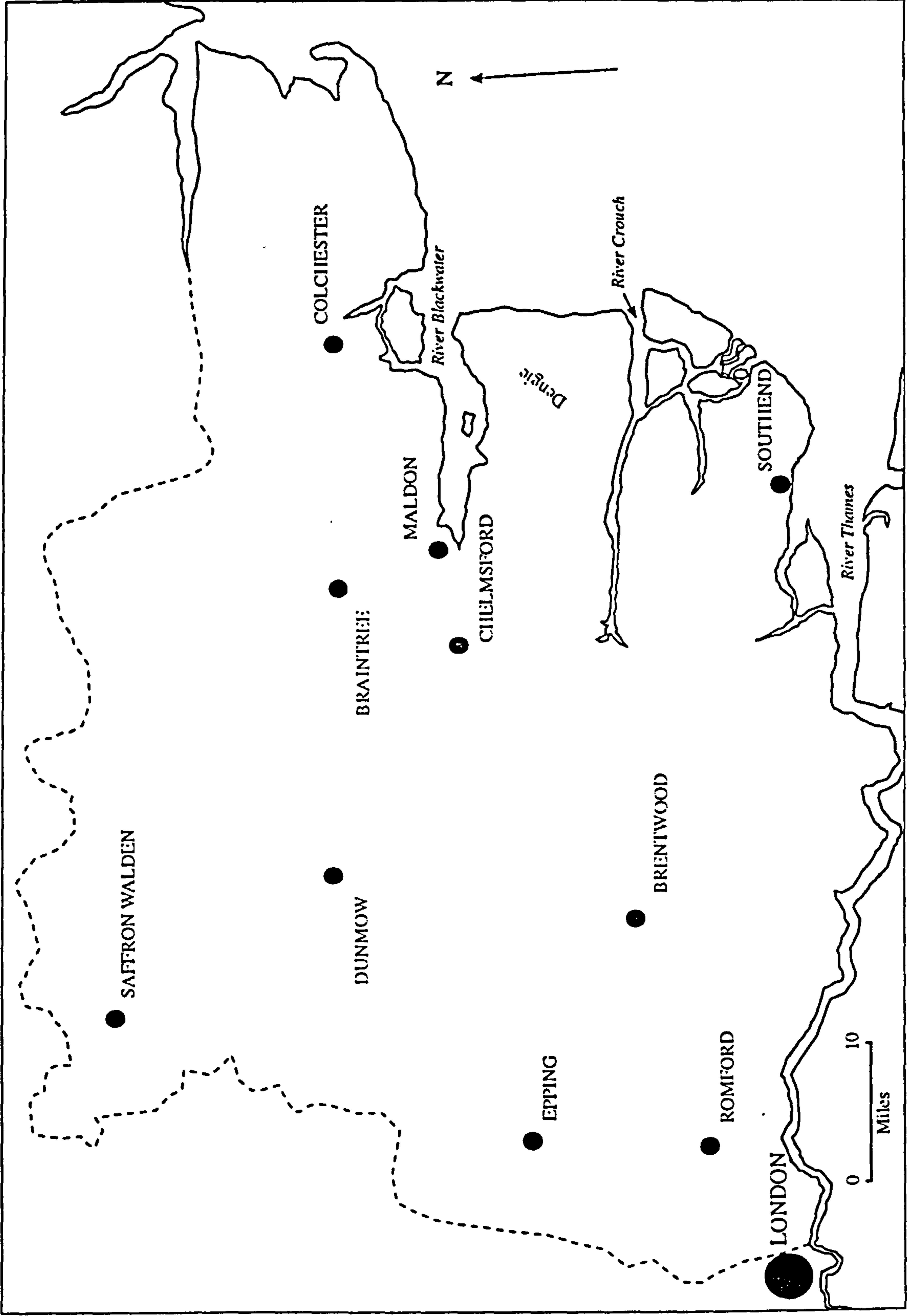


Figure 2: Map Presented Before the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression by Assistant Commissioner R. Hunter Pringle

Scotland, deploying radical new ideas and practices that offered sporadic agricultural recovery demonstrating the occurrence and endurance of farming distress was not always determined by location in space. Close proximity to London made Essex a conceptual 'playground' for metropolitan thinkers, professing the decay of rural England from excursions into what Hunter Pringle termed a 'deplorable' landscape, mythologising the depression both in Essex and nationally.¹⁰ Referring back to economic issues, Essex farmers initially failed to exploit this juxtaposition to London markets by responding cautiously to the potential of supplying milk or market garden produce. The relative absence of large landowners, Lord Petre, the Liberal politician of Thorndon Hall being the most prominent, should have, in theory, emancipated local farming minds, offering unrestricted agriculture and unaccountable experimentation. The response of the Essex farming community was to suggest otherwise.¹¹

Despite the presence of Scottish farmers, the behaviour of local Essex farmers also divulges the rootedness of ideas in space. Farmers were unwilling to experiment, partly through an absence of capital but also because they lacked inspiration to combat depression. Without the financial backing of large landlords, small-scale landowners and owner occupiers were not in possession of adequate capital resources to risk entire harvests on new techniques of manuring or fallowing.¹² Landlord capital was committed to securing the continued presence of a solvent tenantry.¹³ F.J. Coverdale, a local land agent on Lord Petre's Thorndon estate detected an absence of resolve amongst his tenants. Their expectancy of 'something for nothing' corresponded with a common agricultural demand for strong measures of reform through legislative action, the divine right of farmers to anticipate outside intervention.¹⁴ By way of an example Coverdale found tenants increasingly requested the purchase of small building materials, objects a farmer would once have paid for without asking the estate agent out of personal pride. Essex farmers deliberately avoided proactive remedies, preferring a *laissez faire* approach. Local farmers looked on expectantly to a rise in prices as a means to an end and not the propitious result of attempts to make farming pay such as rationalisation, implementation of more efficient techniques and greater competitiveness.¹⁵ The one factor which tipped Essex farmers into a recessionary abyss was the sharp decline in prices. Channing recorded local farming spirits were broken once the price of wheat dropped below 50s a quarter from 1875 onwards.¹⁶ Brown suggests Essex farmers were restricted by their own traditions and thus a malaise prevailed as conventional remedies for depression, most obviously the implementation of Protection measures were not available or no longer appropriate.¹⁷ Local tenant farmers voted unanimously for a resolution urging for the restoration of protective duties such as 5s per quarter on wheat when prices fell below 50s per quarter.¹⁸ The desire for the

Figure 3: County of Essex



return of Protection reflected the defeatism of the county's farmers. Shaw-Leferve reported from his investigative tour across Essex that Protection and the consequent shift of fortunes offered the only escape from depression for the local farmers.

*We called on three of Lord Petre's tenants and met several farmers at each of them. They were mostly Essex men. They were all in the lowest spirits. They thought that the only remedy was a protective duty; they could suggest no other. They were generally arable farmers.*¹⁹

The profitable arrival of Scottish farmers, minus the pervasive apathy and local fatalism, proved agrarian fortunes were to a great degree controlled by the state of mind of individual farmers. One local farming personality predicted the future of Essex farming was 'gloomy'.²⁰ Essex agriculturalists, and English farmers as a whole were less financially bankrupt and more ideologically deficient. William Hutley's comment that 'Essex has plenty of enterprise and plenty of capital', made in 1848, proved transient.²¹

To emphasise how numerous defining themes behind depression were enacted within Essex, this section examines three issues: the degenerative descent of Essex farming and its visible expression in the form of tumbledown waste; the influence of landed estate plans on the local agrarian economy and finally, the role of Scottish emigrant farmers in the revival of Essex agriculture. All three cases offer insights into how land utilisation mapped onto the Essex farming landscape, both real and imaginary, determined a variety of readings of depression.

4.2 The Degeneration of Essex Agriculture

4.2.1 Indicators of Depression

Essex farming methods were broadly determined by divisions in soil type between light glacial gravels in the north that eventually proved receptive to pasture and heavy clays in the south. London clays, though preferred for cereal cultivation were not easily workable requiring regular fallowing.²² Essex farmers consequently adopted mixed farming practices, sharing in the preceding success of the 'Golden Age', but were amongst the first to experience depression. Brown suggests as early as 1875 farmers had recorded declining profit margins.²³ Within seven years S.B.L. Druce could report an alarming reversal of fortunes in Essex to the Richmond Commission, declaring 'farmers are, as a whole in a very deplorable condition and many are verging on bankruptcy'.²⁴ There was no indication of how many farmers considered themselves on the verge of depression, no definition of what 'on the verge' actually meant and no classification of farmers into groups enduring the heaviest losses.

A notorious reputation for ruination in Essex emerged through a series of disastrous exhibitions of depression, both physical and economic, manifest in severe depreciations in land values through to the presence of unprecedented tracts of

abandoned land. An awareness of the decrepit state of Essex agriculture was not restricted to the farming press. Petty-Fitzmaurice and Smith wrote in 1888,

*In Essex, but a few miles distant from the largest city in the world, there is a spot from which it is said that there can be seen nineteen large farms, all vacant, without tenants and for the most part uncultivated; this too in a county which only a few years back used to be one of our greatest food producing districts.*²⁵

Within this short statement a number of issues regarding the perception and signification of depression that related to Essex agriculture are referenced. Firstly, the 'nineteen large farms' out of cultivation may have been temporarily abandoned. However when written about, their derelict state is exaggerated out of proportion so that as symbolic evidence of agrarian decay they are accorded a degree of permanence to the extent they are referred to a century later in historical analysis. The second issue the authors raise intentionally was the incongruousness of large tracts of tumbledown so close to profitable London markets, reflecting public hostility to the alleged apathy and competitive ineptitude of Essex farmers. Finally, Petty-Fitzmaurice and Smith note Essex enjoyed a prosperous reputation during the middle decades of the nineteenth-century. With depression following hard on the heels of this success, the depth of failure is overstated in contrast.

The remarkable drop in the cost of land in Essex was to offer the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression sensational evidence of the atypical kind that tended to exaggerate the worst features of depression. One startling example was Peewit Island in the Blackwater Estuary, six hundred acres of grassland, approximately three hundred of which were saltings, that is land periodically inundated by saltwater. In 1875, at the very end of the 'Golden Age', the land was sold modestly for £8,000 or £13 an acre.²⁶ Ten years later the land was sold again at £420 for the entire property. A farm at Latchendon near Maldon totalling 414 acres purchased in 1873 at £30 an acre was disposed of at £5 10s per acre in 1890.²⁷ Depreciations of land values at thirty to 35% were recorded during the 1870s.²⁸ The worst affected soils were strong, undrained and therefore difficult clays. Prolonged periods of rainfall on inadequately drained land waterlogged soils, consequently rotting crop roots. During dry spells clays hardened like concrete. Such was the severity of the price fall, the Essex Chamber of Agriculture demanded the re-evaluation and reappointment of the tithe adjusted according to new land values.²⁹

Essex endured a high tenancy turnover.³⁰ Such upheaval was directly attributed to tenant farmers unwilling (or unable) to commit further capital into a loss making venture. In addition, tenants increasingly preferred short term contracts. Evidently, in the absence of fourteen and twenty-one year tenancies traditional loyalties to the land were dispensed. Annual contracts not only offered tenants a 'get

out' clause but also freed farmers to seek enhanced tenancy agreements on other estates, perhaps securing landlord commitments to improve building stock or install drainage by taking advantage of a desperation to avoid leaving farms 'in hand'. To outside observers the balance of power in rural England was shifting towards the tenant classes. Local landlord apologist Joseph Beaumont contended the Essex gentry had been forced to meet unreasonable tenant demands, illustrated by Osgood Hanbury on his estate at Coggeshall where rents were reduced by 30/40%, a contention that provoked uproar when suggested at an Essex Farmer's Alliance meeting during October 1879, not least because of the extremity of examples.³¹ The disputed degree of capital support the tenantry received increases the difficulty in reaching a firm conclusion on the level of imaginative flair. Bound up within the system of rural responsibility, farmers through habit relied upon the financial input of benevolent landlords for their protection and personal understanding if capital levels were low, particularly following commitments to farm improvements.³² Late nineteenth-century depression exposed each farmer individually to the harsh realities of the market without support from the collective bosom of other farmers or landlordist guardianship, thus dulling the mind to experimentation when tenants were faced with risking their own capital. In contrast to immigrant farmers or locally-based innovators such as J.J. Mechi, Essex farmers played safe and thereby played into the dangers of depression.³³

If landowners felt compromised by tenant farmers, the tenant was challenged in turn by a groundswell of unionism across the county. Joseph Arch's union movement converged upon the campaigning of Charles Jay of Codham Hall near Braintree who successfully agitated workers to leave Essex.³⁴ Stories reached the county that former Essex labourers were earning 35s a week in Durham collieries. Conversely, and somewhat erroneously Rev. Arthur Goldring, a local Essex clergyman, depicted an entirely different scene, wherein the labourers of the county were content unless agitated by union activists.³⁵ Despite such reassurances, the *Chelmsford Chronicle* touched upon growing anxieties that both labouring and tenant classes were considering emigration to overseas colonies as a way out of depression rather than confront the economic malaise on English soil.³⁶ Though, the union drive may not have instigated an exodus it did, particularly in isolated cases such as Hedingham, provoke a labour shortage, increasing the cost of hiring workers. Unions helped secure a wage of 13s per week across Essex, a one shilling increase on the previous wage. W.E. Bear claimed Essex labourers wages as amongst the lowest in England with ordinary wages on average between 11s and 13s. Only Dorset, Wiltshire and Somerset recorded lower rates of pay.³⁷ Rider Haggard in his agricultural tour across England expected to find some of the most "unhelpful" labouring conditions in Essex due to 'the prevailing depression and its nearness to

London'. He concluded that costly wage bills and quality of labour attracted greater critical comment from farmers rather than the scarcity of workers. Indeed, to combat wage costs and inferior labour, Essex farmers finally employed fewer hands. However, they only fulfilled half the rationalisation solution to ensure more competitive farming by concurrently practising less intensive management. Poor maintenance was just one step away from the dereliction that cemented the notorious reputation of ruination.

4.2.2 The Presence of Tumbledown

Tumbledown land represented the most visible physical manifestation of depression. Its prevalence in Essex reminded farmers of the failed productivity ethos. Despite tumbledown exposing the fallibility of agricultural methods, farmers sought explanations from natural factors such as the underlying soil-type. On heavy clays in Essex this material exegesis offered a superficial and blameless deflection from incompetent methods such as inadequately converted grass land and irregular maintenance of fences, hedgerows and drainage ditches. It is a moot point that local soils were not naturally unresponsive and infertile and could equally have been the degraded result of bad or neglectful management, rendering the soil unworkable. Land in the Dengie Hundred around Southminster, Cold Norton, Tillingham, Steeple and Purleigh was once characterized as 'one of the most industrious and thriving agricultural districts in Essex'.³⁸ Farmers between the Crouch and Blackwater rivers had during the middle decades of the nineteenth-century reaped successive profitable harvests from the same soil that was later condemned.³⁹ Tumbledown dominated Hunter Pringle's account of Essex for the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Within the county boundaries his research uncovered 12.67% of the total Essex land area was unfarmed.⁴⁰ However, these figures did not go undisputed. Messrs. Alfred Darby and Co. of Chelmsford reported to the same inquiry that 'very little than one-hundredth part of the county is out of cultivation'.⁴¹ Their report concluded, however, that tumbledown was not a uniform presence across the county, as the following table demonstrates.

Division of Essex	No. of Parishes	Land which has not been cultivated within the last 5 or 10 years and since left to the unaided effects of Nature and of little or no value			Land Entirely Unoccupied or Uncultivated		
		A.	R.	P.	A.	R.	P.
South-eastern	69	2886	1	23	951	3	26
South-western†	11		-			-	
North-eastern	65	483	2	0	1184	0	0
Northern	82	419	0	0	149	0	0
Eastern	53	40	0	0	272	0	0
Southern	23	40	0	0	163	0	0
Western	68	509	2	0	180	0	0
Midland	57	1465	0	0	559	2	0
TOTAL	428	5843	1	23	3459	3	26

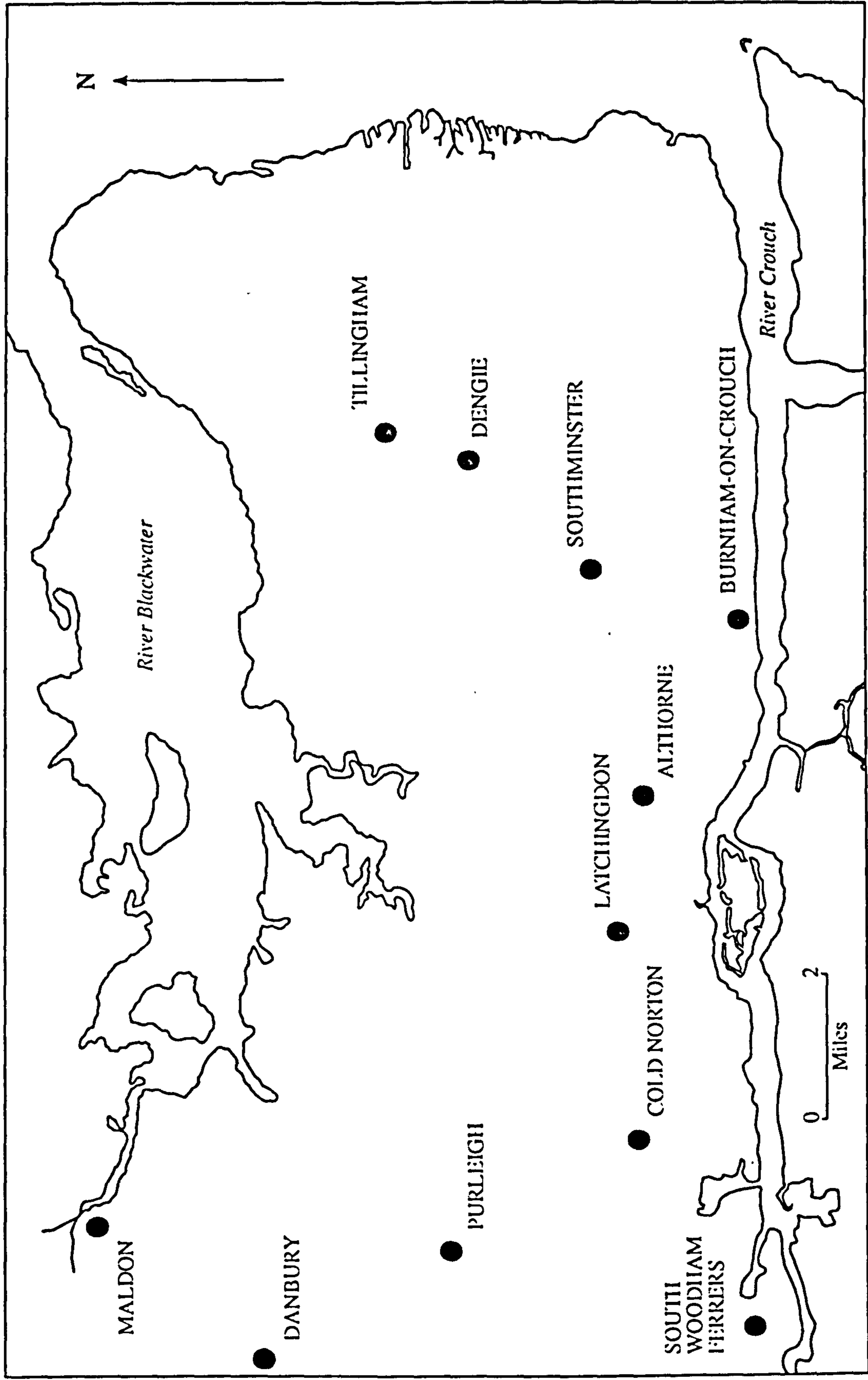
Table 4: Area out of cultivation in Essex. Estimate by Messrs Alfred Darby and Co., Ltd. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence with Appendices. Appendix C7 (1896) c8021, 594-595.

†The South-western district covered the parishes of Walthamstow which were almost totally urban districts.

The south-eastern district appears to be the most heavily hit, including the parishes on the peninsula between the Blackwater and the Crouch rivers. The Darby assessment of the area went as thus: 'In this division great complaint is made that although many of the farms are occupied, yet much of the land is not cultivated'.⁴²

Whatever, the figure, Mr Offin, an auctioneer in Southend informed Shaw-Leferve that he believed 100,000 acres of Essex land could potentially fall out of cultivation should prices have continued to tumble.⁴³ Abandoned land was found on heavy clays and dry, friable soils where pasture was overrun with moss, crested dogtail and goosegrass. In east Essex and Dengie, land left in extended fallow produced unwanted yields of briars and brambles. Unoccupied farms and tumbledown prevailed amongst the wet and waterlogged clays in southern Essex. The general dampness of Essex soils was a response to inferior drainage, which explained the persistence of the excessive water problem two decades after the infamous 'wet seasons' of 1874-79. Saturated fields were disclosed by small clumps of rushes (*Juncus*) and fiorin (*Agrostis stolonifera*) locally referred to as 'watergrass'. The presence of watergrass did not signal discarded land, but it illustrated depression could appear through irregular maintenance.

Figure 4: The Dengie Division of Essex



Within Essex, occurrence of tumbledown was attributed to two factors: abandonment through insufficient capital and poor conversion techniques upon unreceptive soils. As Pringle testified in his supplementary report on the 'grass question', in Chelmsford and Billericay Unions poorly sown deteriorated pasture and abandoned land were indistinguishable.⁴⁴ 'In hand' farms, property unoccupied or irregularly farmed and held under direct control of a landowner, represented a common source of abandonment as agents struggled to recruit farmers willing to assume land previously rejected because of its unprofitability.⁴⁵ Employing the sort of vagueness that perpetuated the mythologising of depression, Pringle reported the extent of Essex land 'in hand' was 'enormous'. As a cumulative effect of inadequately resourced small landowners and tenant farmers possessing insufficient levels of capital, blanket dereliction through the relinquishment of whole farms represented a very real prospect. 'The acreage abandoned in despair is steadily increasing', wrote Hunter Pringle, concluding somewhat alarmingly, 'in a few years unless some change takes place, whole parishes will be entirely out of cultivation'.⁴⁶ Local farming despondency arose from this entrapment within a circle of agrarian distress that dictated the extirpation of tumbledown was possible through the commitment of non-existent capital to ensure continued cultivation. Essex spirits could not afford to crack, as the swift takeover by tumbledown proved.

The failure of widespread pasture conversion was locally recognised as the second causal factor behind the prevalence of tumbledown. Despite the long tradition of crop production and the comparative successes of the 'Golden Age', local experts such as F.J. Coverdale were not convinced Essex was good arable country.⁴⁷ Poor returns from new pasture suggested grazing was not conducive to profitable reward either. But this judgement simplistically denies farming culpability. In a wholesale shift in land use patterns that saw the Essex wheat acreage halved from 201,000 acres in 1874 to 93,000 in 1895, farmers thought they perceived potential benefits through conversion to pasture. Lambert reported how one unnamed farm in Essex through the sale of hay, corn and milk accompanying the purchase of a number of cows had sustained six years of profit up to 1894.⁴⁸ Pringle even commented in his Assistant Commissioners report 'it is no exaggeration to say that this change [the extension of dairy farming for London] has been most beneficial to the farmers who made it'.⁴⁹ More typically, profitability and conversion proved mutually exclusive in the Essex experience. Critically, unfamiliar methods in preparation for this switch were employed.⁵⁰ An unquantifiable number of farmers failed to secure positive dividends. Ineffectual conversion, consequently was responsible for abandoned farms across southern Essex. Overwhelmingly the biggest problem lay less in ineffectual management once grass was sown and more in the preparation of land for transformation to pasture. Essex soils required meticulous "cleaning" of weeds and

proper fallowing. Perhaps 20% of abandoned land had originated in ineffectual preparation.⁵¹ Pringle reported 90% of the 'blackened portions' on his map of dereliction required cleaning before profitable pasture farming was a possibility.⁵² Bad maintenance practices such as failure to break up pasture annually, merely compounded initiatory errors.

The choice to leave ineffectually modified land as waste was equally a perversely conscious decision as it was enforced. Capital could be saved by neglecting maintenance, though this positively encouraging the haemorrhaging of rural labour. Fields unscientifically sown with Italian rye grass and clovers were no longer broken up.⁵³ The cost of restoring tumbledown land to former prosperity rendered farmers indisposed to a reversion back to traditional arable production. Lord Rayleigh's agent estimated that it cost £10 4s 6d per acre to resuscitate fields abandoned for three years or longer.⁵⁴

Tumbledown offers an insight into the cultural consumption of agricultural depression. Despairing criticism of the *appearance* of the Essex agrarian landscape attached greater significance to an unkempt and ravaged demeanour over the importance of restoring workable land to a productive state. Appropriating the 'darkness' metaphor of Pringle's map, Haggard labelled the area between the Crouch and Blackwater the 'Black Districts' of Essex. '[They] did not look as though it would support one beast upon ten acres of it' he determined, 'although there was the scattering of the odd well-farmed and productive looking holding'. This final observation demonstrated not all land was uncultivable, and indeed elevated the role of the farmer in determining soil productivity as the possibility of surviving depression was unlikely to be exclusively accorded to chance location on superior soil.⁵⁵ Yet the attention bestowed upon tumbledown was out of all proportion in terms of its actual impact upon farming economies. If its visibility proved indicative of failure, its impermanence was less well understood. The temporary nature of grassland, be it proper pasture or waste is revealed in the wild fluctuations of the wheat acreage in Essex. From the mid-1870s until 1896 the area of wheat registered continual reductions when a reversal in the order of 17.1% back to wheat from grass occurred inside one year.⁵⁶ Pringle conceded the area and appearance of tumbledown grass was in constant flux. The problem resided in the statistical inadequacy of the Agricultural Returns as no reliable records quantified the number of farms 'in hand' or acres of tumbledown. From his detailed investigative work Pringle was forced to conclude that in Dengie, the extent of land 'absolutely unoccupied' was actually very small.⁵⁷ However, land uncultivated, sustaining nominal rent and perhaps utilized for the roughest of grazing, an altogether more ambiguous classification, was deemed prevalent.⁵⁸ This absence of objectivity undermined Pringle's depiction of depression in southern Essex. The map represented little more than a snapshot, though it claimed

to record all cases of land abandoned at some point since 1880. Had Pringle returned to the area when his investigative tour was concluded and began the whole process of recording tumbledown again, his results could have been transformed. In effect by the time of publication, the map was obsolete. What remains unclear is whether fragments of abandoned land had returned to cultivation, perhaps fluctuating between states of productivity and barrenness or had continually resisted attempts to revive production for fourteen years, the temporal scale Pringle determined for inclusion of evidence. The lack of a precise definition of tumbledown rendered it impossible to quantify 'depressed landscapes' both as an objective study and a theoretical proposition.⁵⁹ The map contained a series of biases, none more so than the recording of exceptionally high levels of dereliction in an exceptionally degenerated area. Rather than offering useful evidence of agricultural depression mapped in real space, subsequent consumption in the media and by the public served only to distort contemporary cultural signification of the pervasiveness of failure.⁶⁰

4.3 *The Role of Landowners in Essex*

4.3.1 The Petre Family Estate

Two antagonistic viewpoints on the role of landlords prevailed. One, that landed aristocrats diverted necessary capital away from farmers, the second that landowners offered a bedrock of moral and financial stability requisite at a time of constant flux. In Essex, divisions in opinion were not unequivocally pronounced. Shaw-Leferve did how establish that whether pro- or anti-landowning, the general consensus was that Essex landlords had reacted to slowing to the impending price collapse for agricultural goods.⁶¹ Rider Haggard on his tour through the county during 1901 was firmly convinced of the plight of the Essex landowner, believing the local patrician class had in relative terms lost more than both tenants and labourers.⁶²

*Speaking generally...it may be assumed that the landowner in Essex who has to depend solely on the produce of his acres is in the vast majority a ruined man, who, to live at all must let the home which he cannot sell, with its sporting rights, the only valuable assets that remain to him.*⁶³

Alternatively, F.A. Channing believed ineffectual financial investment by Essex landlords proved indicative of a wider problem across England. Typically landlords had not sufficiently equipped their estates during the preceding years of prosperity and then compounded this error when depression hit by failing to reduce rents with necessary haste. This set in motion a knock-on effect of ruining tenants leading to lost revenue from farm rents which ultimately penalised landlords.⁶⁴

To illustrate the financial and social impacts of depression on tenant farming, reference is made to the Petre family estate papers. Essex, distinct from many southern English counties did not possess a high proportion of large landowners and

in a sense the Petre case study is somewhat unrepresentative.⁶⁵ Equally, the Petre family were renowned liberal landlords and even unsympathetic anti-aristocratic advocates could not deny significant paternalistic attempts to retain sitting tenants and encourage the settlement of immigrant farmers to avoid unoccupied tenancies.⁶⁶ Despite considerable financial backing and capital investment beyond 1879, the acknowledged start of depression, Lord Petre's tenants were unable to sustain profits. Somewhat contradictorily to Pringle's evidence, pockets of profitability were detectable in Dengie, the Petre example demonstrated to a degree, location in space did determine survival odds irrespective of economic assets and active paternal reassurance, confusing in the process a definitive explanation for the occurrence of depression by negating the role of the farmer in determining personal financial outcomes.

The Petre family owned two properties in Essex, Thorndon near Brentwood in central Essex which was the family seat and a 1,435 acre estate in the Dengie Hundred near Southminster in the heart of 'depression country'.⁶⁷ Altogether their property totalled over 18,000 acres with a gross agricultural value of £20,000 per annum, despite by the mid 1890s rents being reduced below 50%.⁶⁸ The family represented one of the largest single landowners in the county, but this privilege failed to ensure viable farming, and as elsewhere, tenant farmers were forced into bankruptcy or at the very best a psychological defeatism that equally propelled them from the land. On the Thorndon estate investment had been conspicuous. At Barley Lands Farm, the arrival of a Scottish tenant resulted in the endowment of £4,000 for a new farm house, cottages and various other buildings, contradicting claims that paternal investment evaporated during depression. F.J. Coverdale, the estate agent reported between 1885 and 1892 nearly £24,000 was invested on maintenance schemes alone.⁶⁹ Over that period the Thorndon estate cash accounts also reveal £15,739 was sunk into repair work in addition to one off costs such as £700 spent ensuring the heavy clay East Horndon Hall farm remained tenanted.⁷⁰

Financial management of a large estate such as Thorndon required an elaborate balancing act, shifting profits from one farm to offset deficits on others. In the case of the Petre property, efforts to achieve capital equipoise assumed a geographical dimension that conformed to a broad north/south split in fortunes, with the southern portion incurring the heaviest debts on the least workable soils, despite proximity to the London, Tilbury and Southend railway. For example, produce from Home Farm at Ingatestone, the model property held by Albert Marriage was sold in 1884-85, the same year as the East Horndon farm crisis, for roughly £700, offsetting extra investment of the same amount spent on ensuring continued production.⁷¹ East Horndon Hall also confirmed depression could become rooted to specific locations as subsequent tenants were equally stricken by amassing bad debt, so that by 1903 an

advert was once more placed in the local press for the farm with a rent of £452 per annum.⁷² Other examples of good farmers reduced to accumulating deficit littered the Petre properties. Mountnessing Hall Farm, described as 'perhaps the best farm on the estate' consisting of 438 acres of fine grassland in proximity to a brook, witnessed a cut in rent despite investment in dairy cattle accommodation.⁷³ The Squier family, described by Coverdale as 'the best types of yeoman farmer', cultivated the 804 acre Dunton Hills holding. A long tradition of profitable farming across generations was extinguished by ten years of depression from the mid-1880s. Rent with all taxes inclusive was pegged at £905 in 1884. By 1894, the figure was halved to £450 plus £72 for partial payment of the tithe. Following outlays on other taxes, the landlord actually received £346. Unsurprisingly, Dunton Hills was situated in the unworkable southern portion at Thorndon.

4.3.2 Declining Receipts and the Accumulation of Debt

Landowners decried the unfair burden of tenant debt, claiming investment could not be sustained while rents were simultaneously lowered.⁷⁴ The Thorndon example upholds the landlordist contention as rental receipts plunged from £5,385 in 1880 to £3,065 in 1892-93, a drop of 43%, the direct result of rental remittance. Though the Thorndon estate did not represent a celebrated example of the failure of patrician sponsored farming, it does in historical analytical terms lend credence to landlordist arguments. Landowners may have been coerced into extra expenditure to maintain tenant levels, but the alternative of further losses incurred by 'in hand' farms proved less palatable. The experiences on the Thorndon estate were typical. In 1884 seven farms were held 'in hand', an area of approximately 2,000 acres. The lost rental values amounted to over £1,800 or roughly 15% of the total estate rent receipts.⁷⁵ These losses were irrecoverable unlike, in theory, rental arrears, the levels of which in combination with associated compensatory rental allowances, display an acute sensitivity to the annual recovery or downturn of agriculture. The 1895 arrears of just £729, the fourth lowest level in the twenty year study period seem, initially at least, to be an anomaly. (Figure 5) Perhaps, the corresponding figure for the level of allowances acceded to by Lord Petre, an unprecedented £2,294, acted as a temporary palliative. These allowances included the payment of tithe rates, rent rebates and other land tax 'burdens'. Yet further investigation presents a less obviously defined procession towards remunerative farming. In 1895 just 18 allowances were authorized. For 1894 the figure had been 30 and during 1896 rose to 33, the highest amount during the twenty study years. At odds with the high expenditure on allowances, a feasible explanation for 1895 concludes depression was concentrated on a few exceptionally bad farms, while in 1894 and 1896 smaller concessions were made sporadically. This scenario was repeated on estates across England and alerts

students to problems in essentialising local experiences. The Petre example affirms large landed estates could prove too insensitive a scale to study depression with farms operating in a comparatively small area performing differentially.

Superficially, the Petre case study attests to greater exercise of objective criteria in determining depression as certain economic thresholds such as the level of liability were passed. However, this judgement disregards the mutability of landlord and tenant financial self-assessment. Growth in arrears quite probably triggered a cumulative effect whereby the landowner was repeatedly impelled by the *perceived* pattern of depression to offer greater financial assistance, perhaps even as a panic measure. Individual estate agents would have enforced differing criteria that is rarely, if at all, recorded. Coverdale does not reveal on what grounds farmers received support at Thorndon.

The danger with arrears is their rise and fall is interpreted as dependent upon price fluctuations and the ability of farmers to raise capital to disburse on rent and other property taxes. Thus the gradual diminution in debt between 1897 and 1901 could be interpreted as part of a steady recovery of English farming. Yet debits were determined not in the marketplace but by local landlords. The lowering of rent rendered its payment possible, thus reducing the accrual of arrears.⁷⁶ Perhaps the most conspicuous evidence of depression was manifest in sudden increases in arrears for one or possibly two years, suggesting the depth of failure had not been predicted in setting rental allowances. Dangers exist in taking this assessment at face value. Data discrepancies such as the use of one and half years worth of evidence for 1894 (from Lady Day 1893 to Michaelmas 1894) contort accounts.⁷⁷ Unsurprisingly, 1894 recorded the greatest arrearage. The relationship between arrears and rental allowances was not elementary. As Figure 5 illustrates, behaviour of both data series mutates between the start and culmination of study. Initially, allowances were awarded excessively, over-compensating for potential arrears. A probable explanation recognises the inexperience of F.J. Coverdale, newly appointed as estate agent in the year previous to the study period start. A pattern emerged where allowance diminution transpired concurrent to inflated debts, affirming significant concessions were required to offset arrears despite an apparent circularity of argument: ultimately landlords supplied the funds for allowances that were ultimately paid back as rent. By the early 1900s arrears and allowances matched approximately, confusing a causal alliance between allowances and arrear levels. On three occasions, 1885, 1894 and 1902, when the two series were matched, the following year witnessed an increase in allowance and a significant drop in arrears. Rental abatements, it appears, were approved in a knee-jerk reaction to previous annual arrears figure and not in line with prevailing market prices, leading to gross over-compensation. The presence of an underlying public relations motive cannot be

Arrears Levels and Rental Allowance Amounts on the Petre Estate

(The Thorndon Estate Cash Accounts 1884-1905, E.R.O. D/DP A 381)

Year	Arrears (£)	Allowances (£)
1885	1125	1029
1886	506	1837
1887	689	1534
1888	1182	1436
1889	804	1313
1890	1443	1501
1891	1434	1233
1892	954	1020
1893	1426	1481
1894	2242	2124
1895	729	2294
1896	1063	1777
1897	1351	940
1898	983	1510
1899	988	612
1900	818	301
1901	445	522
1902	788	630
1903	156	965
1904	1217	835
1905	986	1043

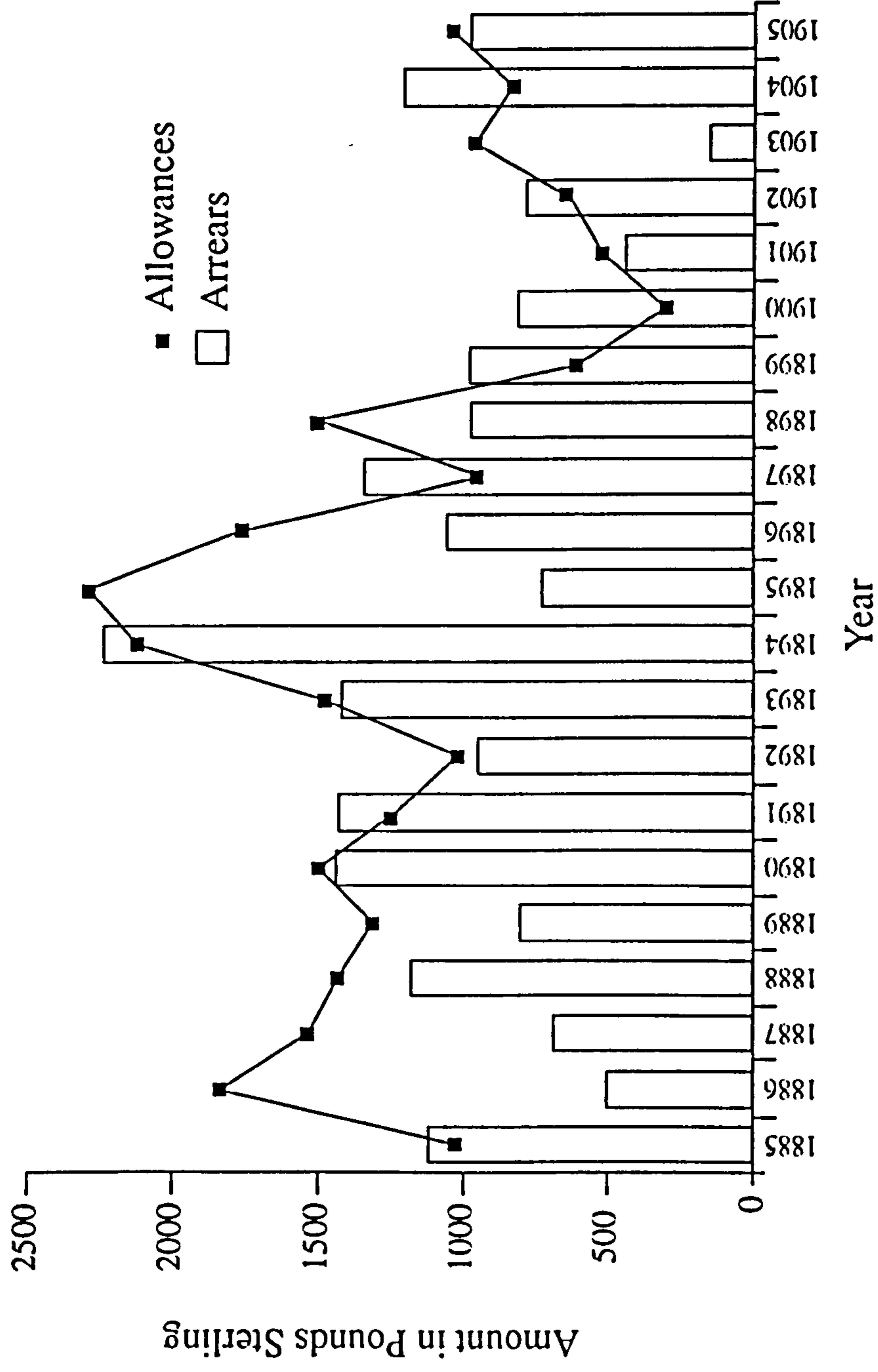


Figure 5: Arrear Levels and Allowance Amounts on the Petre Estate

denied. Rental arrears signified the presence of depression. Allowances and one-off payments, alternatively, could be more readily obscured within estate accounts and in tandem with previous rent reductions could within the short-term be employed to promote the comparative absence of debt.

4.3.3 Tenancy Turnover

The Petre case study additionally offers a pertinent reflection on high tenancy turnover rates. Unfulfilled agreements broke the continuity of farming practice, leaving holdings temporarily abandoned but also provoking the need for a capital balancing act.⁷⁸ Sharp drops in tenant levels, such as between 1898 and 1899 when 18 holdings were given up, precipitated an equally swift fall in rent receipts. In this case the level dropped from £15,042 in 1898 to £14,245 in 1899.⁷⁹ Despite most farmers securing rent abatements, tenants were incapable of making farms remunerative, leaving abandoned tenantry agreements in the wake of their flight to the city. At Tillingham Hall Farm, the holding had been profitably cultivated until the sitting tenant died in 1876. A new tenant could not keep the farm solvent and by 1891 relinquished the property after accruing bad debts.⁸⁰ Cash accounts from Lady Day 1893 to Michaelmas 1894 revealed Tillingham Hall farm was 'in hand' three years later.⁸¹ To expeditiously avoid a growing collection of farms laid waste, Coverdale recruited tenants from beyond the narrowly defined local pool of potential tenants. During the 1880s fourteen Scottish farmers moved south taking over 3,840 acres of the Thorndon estate. They were joined by three Devonshire and two Northumberland farmers who cultivated a further 1,600 acres.

Heavy investment after prolonged neglect did not necessarily guarantee a profitable return. Neither did the importing of outside farming knowledge as demonstrated at the 267 acre Cowbridge Grange Magna farm. Mr Perry assuming the tenancy at Cowbridge in Michaelmas 1879, quickly amassed arrears of £120 and thus continually railed against debt. Within six years the rent had been reduced from £306 with additional payments for tithe and insurance, to £217 per annum. A further unspecified reduction followed two years later. By 1893 Perry was bankrupt. From Michaelmas 1893 Robert Hodge, a Scottish farmer, took over Cowbridge Grange Magna and despite expenditure of £3,700 and a favourable rent of £210 per annum Coverdale could only report the farm was unworkable, making a 'dead yearly loss'.⁸²

4.4 *The Arrival of the Scots.*

4.1.1 Profitable Cow-keepers

The arrival of Scottish farmers in Essex proved farmers could reap limited dividends from self-help and a disregard for trenchant concepts within low return economic

environment. Scottish migrant farmers were portrayed in numerous media accounts as highly enterprising, commonly regarded within rural literature as a rare example of success. Pamela Horn ascribes two propositions to their signification within contemporary discourses of depression.⁸³ Primarily the Essex-Scots offered tangible evidence of a potential escape from the cycle of depression. Secondly, their arrival directly altered the economic outcomes of Essex farming generally as between 120 and 130 migrants rescued over 40,000 acres from varying states of dereliction on holdings ranging from 120 to over 700 acres.⁸⁴ Farms formerly in the possession of one family for centuries were abandoned and the Scots filled their place.⁸⁵

The Scottish migrants succeeded in returning abandoned or permanently fallowed land into cultivation by concentrating on dairy production and the sale of hay rather than traditional wheat growing. Disregarding the Essex disposition towards the four-course system the migrants transferred their conventional resistance to over-fallowing from Scotland.⁸⁶ Primrose McConnell, chronicler and member of the migrant colony in Essex found English farmers fallowed 1 in 27 acres in comparison with the Scottish method of 1 in 254 acres.⁸⁷ Tellingly, Essex farmers fallowed 1 in 15 acres.⁸⁸ McConnell found fallowing on Scottish soils actually contributed to the strengthening of weed cover, so that when a rested field was cleaned for return to cultivation, weeds quickly reappeared. Furthermore, proximity of weeds to a recently ploughed field meant their seeds took hold on loose soils by a process of wind distribution. In Essex, with its high number of fallowed fields, the likelihood of this process occurring was much greater. Blessed with the freshness of an outsiders vision, migrant farmers realised that though fallowing *per se* did not reduce profits or induce tumbledown, the associated failure to replenish field nutrient levels during a fallow year with manure and other 'ingredients removed from the soil' severely degraded soil fertility.⁸⁹ Contrary to the popular local assumption that Essex clays lacked natural fertility, McConnell proposed the luxuriance of local soils had prevented the total reduction in fertility by withstanding a systematic scouring by Essex farmers who failed to furnish the soil with fertilisers both natural and artificial to balance nutrient deficits.⁹⁰

The presence and success of Scottish farmers invokes a pertinent theme to this thesis, the spatial limits to knowledge. Migrants highlighted the rootedness of traditional local agricultural theory by proving with judicious implementation, extraneous and unscientific ideas could be applied profitably. However one cautionary qualification to their subsequent veneration proposes Scottish farmers only understood one technique themselves, namely Scottish lowland pasture and thus supplanted it wholesale to Essex. Though as history records their methods worked exceedingly well, the converse could quite easily have been true had Essex soils proven less responsive to new pasture techniques.

To understand the success of the Essex-Scots, four issues are examined sequentially. Firstly, an assessment is made of the achievements behind the transfer of 'alien' ideas. Migrant farmer prosperity was celebrated nationally, but was misrepresented in the press. One classic illustration is that Scottish importance within the economic revival of Essex was elevated out of proportion. The presence of successful Scottish farmers was, alternatively, symbolic. Numerically their total of 130 farmers formed a very small majority within an estimated total of over 3,000 farmers in Essex. Rather than assessing 'real and truthful' comments favourable of Scottish migration, attention is directed towards the criteria by which success was gauged, primarily because this informs an investigative fascination with conceptual constructions of depression. If assessment of the relative success of the migrants influenced debate surrounding solutions to depression, both at local and national levels, of special interest to Essex farmers was ascertaining by what formula prosperity had been attained. The second issue examined, therefore, scrutinizes the methods colonisers employed to competitive advantage. Thirdly, atypical circumstances discredited the Scottish formula as a potential blueprint for Essex and England.⁹¹ Scottish farmers, it was alleged, manipulated an unprecedented opportunity to exploit the financial weakness of Essex landowners, unaffected by local social conventions of patrician led agriculture. Finally, the chapter considers local enthusiasm, or otherwise, for repeating the expatriate approach. Unaccustomed with English tenant orthodoxy and unconcerned by solecistic behaviour, migrant farmers readily expected the freedom to cultivate and acted accordingly, adopting routines previously beyond the conservative imagination of average Essex cultivators.⁹² Their cause may have been helped by an inclination towards absentee landlordism in poorer districts such as Maldon, liberating Scottish farmers from rigid estate cropping regimes.⁹³ Quite evidently, Essex farmers had to dispense with convention in addition to replicating new techniques. Coverdale concluded only two types of successful tenant existed in Essex: those with exceptionally high levels of capital and Scottish emigrants who 'as a rule farm with more energy than the Essex farmer'.⁹⁴

4.4.2 How Successful Were the Scots?

Faced with abandoned holdings as land held 'in hand', coupled with an absence of local interest to undertake tenancy agreements even with desperately low rents, local landowners were forced to advertise in the national farming press for willing tenant farmers. Primrose McConnell recalled numerous advertisements in the *North British Agriculturalist* between 1881 and 1883 proclaiming 'land going begging' in southern England.⁹⁵ The offer of land appealed to farmers from southern Scotland where excessively high rents caused by competition for vacant holdings left little

opportunity for potential farmers with limited capital to secure property.⁹⁶ Ayrshire and Renfrewshire proved the most popular origins for emigrant farmers, supplementing a small trickle from Northumberland, Lancashire and Devon.⁹⁷

The successes of Scottish migrants were both material and figurative. From a migrant perspective, they had secured land at affordable rents, whereas continued residency in lowland Scotland would certainly have prompted a move to the city. Their residency in Essex was not temporary and within a few years a substantial proportion of them were 'comfortably off' on land Essex farmers believed incapable of returning profits during depression.⁹⁸ By exploiting the desperation of Essex landowners, particularly in securing leases unencumbered by clauses prohibiting free cropping, immigrant Scots quite probably achieved greater personal autonomy than had they remained in Scotland. Through self-help, migrant farmers claimed to work more intensively than their Essex hosts. Additionally, a trade in cash crops to nearby London was developed. Such enterprise received favourable recognition from the second Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression keen to promote a rare example of success through pro-active solutions. Subsequent appraisals were dependent upon ideology. For example, those resistant to land reform ideas such as Lord Petre's agent contrived to portray migrants as testimony to the profit potential attainable under paternalism.⁹⁹ Naturally, this perspective disregarded huge sums (up to £4,000) landowners spent on new buildings as an allurements to new tenants.¹⁰⁰

The accomplishments of Scottish farmers were not dispersed evenly across Essex. Unsurprisingly, migrants clustered in specific areas. Ongar, Brentwood and Chelmsford proved attractive prompting the area to be labelled the 'Scotch Colony'.¹⁰¹ Pringle recorded similar clusters around Dengie in the parishes of Woodham Ferris and Cold Norton.¹⁰² The concentrated distribution reflected factors such as knowledge of vacant holdings reaching Scotland by word-of-mouth as well as the concerted recruitment efforts of estate agents discriminating in favour of employing Scottish tenants. A sense of community bonding is evinced through McConnell's literary texts which were written in the plural, typically '*...we cannot help thinking that our English neighbours literally waste the labour of men and horses, from the labouring way of doing their work, and the clumsy machines with which they do it*'.¹⁰³ The need for community spirit was paramount to counteract local hostility towards Scottish farmers despite, or perhaps because of, their success.¹⁰⁴ Migrant farmers were viewed as outsiders and regarded with suspicion and resentment, reflecting the ignorance propagated by inward looking geographies of most native farmers. Overwhelmingly the biggest cause of indignation was generated by the preferential treatment new Scottish tenants secured upon arrival in Essex. Landowners had not succumbed readily to rental abatements previously, yet appeared to possess no financial impediments to spending vast sums on cow-houses

and other dairy farm buildings. The Scottish tendency to employ immediate family members rather than hire labour for work such as milking also provoked disdain.¹⁰⁵ Pamela Horn revealed larger arable farmers contemptuously dismissed the Scots as mere 'cow-keepers'.¹⁰⁶ They were accused of poor farming techniques despite securing profits where Essex farmers failed. Hon. E.G. Strutt noted most farmers in his Essex locale refused to copy the Scottish émigré model.¹⁰⁷ From the Essex agricultural perspective, the Scots cultivated formerly abandoned land or farms held 'in hand', in a disagreeable style. 'The Englishman must and will farm his arable land well' George Lambert wrote in his dissenting report to the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. 'He cannot bear to see it lying in grass', a reference to Scottish preference for pasture farming.¹⁰⁸ The judicious use of cows, turnips and grass by Scottish farmers provoked the haughtiest of responses from arable cultivators who evidently perceived themselves to be superior farmers regardless of what their farm accounts informed them.¹⁰⁹ Secure in their own belief that traditional methods could equally resolve the farming crisis without resorting to undertaking menial tasks usually carried out by labourers, Essex farmers revealed a popular assumption that a local agricultural depression required local solutions. Conversion may have produced short-term gains, but pastoralism was not the basis of the stately (southern) English agrarian tradition. Despite protests to the contrary proclaiming the imminent death of agriculture, the underlying presumption of indigenous farmers appears to have been that English farming would ultimately recover rendering conversion unnecessary.

4.4.3 The Migrant Blueprint for Success

Critical to the rapidly earned prosperity of Scottish farmers was their identification of problems inherent in Essex methods. McConnell distinguished six obstacles to profitability: poor cultivation techniques; inferior manure application; flat ridges; ineffectual and out-moded ploughs; extravagant use of horses and a general waste of capital. Scottish farmers chose to avoid replicating local errors by imposing their own pasture-based approach to farming and establishing trade links with London. This section briefly examines the problems identified with Essex farming and investigates the migrant solutions that supplanted centuries of tradition. Naturally, not all migrant farming cases were successful as demonstrated by the experiences of Mr Wylie a Scottish farmer at Woodbarns Farm on the Petre estate at Thorndon. Wylie endured heavy losses so that within seven years he quit the holding on the verge of bankruptcy, attributing his downfall on an inability to compete with low prices.

The most evident error committed in the name of Essex agriculture was in the method of sowing crops, an accusation guaranteed to vex local farmers ingrained in conventional production methods.

*I am convinced that many crops, especially wheat, are sown too thin, and are lost for this reason. So we [the Scots] use...50% more seed per acre than many in the neighbourhood do, and are satisfied with the results.*¹¹⁰

Secondly, McConnell also noted in preparing soils for sowing, Essex farmers were miserly in their use of manure, and had regularly advised Scottish incomers correspondingly. A final error committed during the propagation stage was a misplaced reliance on flat ridges that caused water-logging regardless of any underlying drainage system installed in the prosperous three decades prior to depression.¹¹¹ If flooding occurred during seed planting, the crop could fail. This fact may have seriously determined farming fortune on marshy land in the Dengie Hundred. Ploughing contributed further offences against productive farming. McConnell expressed doubt that Essex clays were so stiff as to merit three horse ploughing.¹¹² In one case, he had confronted a farmer using three horses as to whether they were required. When the farmer disappeared for lunch to prove the point McConnell pulled the plough himself without any equine assistance. The native Essex wooden plough was a defective instrument. Its unwieldy nature stopped the soil from being turned effectively, a problem undetectable as long as the plough was used during stubble or fallow ploughing. In fairness to Essex farmers, as these tasks constituted the majority of ploughing undertaken in Essex, then one must conclude the problem was artificially created by the different questions asked of the soil by migrant farmers. Indeed, McConnell only discovered the extent of poorly turned soils following an attempt to break up former arable land lying as waste.¹¹³ A final general criticism branded English farmers as profligate with the limited resources they held.¹¹⁴ Essex farmers relied on arable production to generate income, with a small degree of stock-feeding and cow-keeping. Alternatively, Scottish farmers practised temporary pasture, cultivating few acres and thus cutting the need for labour, seed and manure bills. The crucial difference was migrant farmers were prepared to adapt.

Despite the increased interest in pasture conversion techniques, Essex overwhelmingly remained arable country. Scottish appraisals of East Anglian farming generally conformed with Hunter Pringle's dire prediction that wheat production could not be profitable until prices rose by 45%.¹¹⁵ Unprepared to fall into the same trap as Essex arable farmers, Scottish farmers bravely confronted tradition. The difference Scottish farmers instantly made illustrated pasture could be viable in Essex by favouring Ayrshire methods over indigenous routines. To cut down on stocking costs migrants brought their own cattle with them from Scotland in a specially hired train, thus further replicating conditions back home.¹¹⁶ This experience lends authority to claims the Scots were no greater experimentalists than Essex farmers. Indeed, by recreating lowland Scotland in Essex, the migrants proved equally rooted to their own farming knowledge systems.

The most significant change Scottish farmers exerted was a severe rationalisation of production costs reducing the number of labouring hands while more menial tasks were undertaken by the extended family. Savings were also achieved by fallowing less and using arable land as temporary pasture, particularly when wheat prices remained depressed. More importantly, migrant farmers found expenditure on labour at over £2 per acre, the typical cost to an Essex farmer, unpalatable.¹¹⁷ Behaving more like the capitalists English farmers patently were not, Scottish farmers sought cost-cutting measures, however unpopular. McConnell narrates the migrant consensus.

*The first thing was to reduce the number of men and horses; for however sorry one may be about depriving working-men of their opportunity of earning a wage, self-preservation is the first law of Nature, and a farmer obviously could not find work for men to his own detriment.*¹¹⁸

Quite naturally, the Essex farming community was indignant at this betrayal of the unofficial code of rural responsibility to the labour force. 'That the labourers are being driven to the towns, and that the population of our parishes is diminishing is not surprising'.¹¹⁹ Inevitably, the problem of population decline was firmly blamed upon Scottish farmers. The extent of the labour rationalisation can be gleaned from Pringle's Assistant Commissioner's Report when he estimated following substitution to the Scottish system 'where formerly three labourers earned a livelihood, not more than one will now be found'.¹²⁰ However, this ignores one crucial issue. With countless Essex farmers bankrupted or abandoning tenancy agreements, many labouring men were being laid-off in any case. Vacant and therefore unproductive farmsteads also denied labourers work. The Scottish migrants, equally, disagreed that they had restricted local opportunities to acquire a new tenancy agreement by taking over abandoned holdings.¹²¹ Scarfe claims rationalisation was undertaken across East Anglia from 1879 onwards.¹²² However, this rationalisation was less to do with efficiency drives or mechanisation, processes that required undertaking for farming to become competitive, but rather because farmers could no longer afford to employ low quality labour.

By employing the immediate family, Scotsmen tapped the enthusiasm of harvesting the rewards of personal effort.¹²³ Scotsmen were accredited with greater energy over their Essex counterparts and clearly this absence of listlessness contributed to their success.¹²⁴ In contrast an Essex Agricultural Society Report noted a decline in field cleaning and general maintenance amongst indigenous Essex farmers that left land increasingly over-run with weeds, even in cultivation.¹²⁵ The local Essex farming community were accused of apathy and McConnell confidently prescribed the reason why: the insularity of English farmers. 'When I see south-country Englishmen bewailing the misfortunes of clay-land farmers, I cannot help

wondering if it is their limited experiences makes them do so'.¹²⁶ Associated with this claim was a sense Essex farmers had drained their imaginative resources.¹²⁷ Quite naturally Scots were more vibrant, making a fresh start in a new area, unburdened with tradition. A Lancashire tourist astutely observed 'new-comers [the Scots] are going in for milk, cheese, butter, fruit and sheep but with the average Essex farmer it is corn, corn, corn'.¹²⁸

Essex farmers were sensitive to criticism, especially from outside witnesses and immigrant farmers. The *Essex Review* reacted angrily to a series of claims made by J.E. Patterson in his book *Tillers of the Soil* that Essex men were incapable of generating their own resolutions.¹²⁹ Patterson was particularly scathing of the farming community, and though his work was a fictional account of a Yorkshire farmer in Essex, his criticisms corresponded with critical comment from migrant farmers and evidence before the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Unimaginative farming methods were contextualised within 'the narrow, plodding, suspicious, modern East Saxon atmosphere', local farmers were described as 'sleepy Essexites' and the area portrayed as a 'mean county, generally dull and stodgy Essex', an observation that equally referred to the soils as well as the farmers. Indeed Patterson, implies some form of physical determination in making a connection between soil characteristics and the people of Essex, declaring 'the lethargic temperament of the East Anglian was but like the starved soil of Essex'.¹³⁰

Scottish migrant farmers had achieved prosperity by shifting from traditional arable systems to pasture in locations where many experts felt such practices could not be sustained. Yet it is the active ingenuity of the Scots, in addition to a willingness to rationalise, that influenced financial outcomes. The favoured fertilisers of Scottish tenants, whole or dissolved bones with some nitrate of soda in association with organic manures proved unresponsive on Essex soils. To assess what combination of artificial products worked, Scottish farmers left experimental ridges in fields with one unmanured, another receiving a double dose, though both were dressed in artificial fertilisers. By this approach nitrogenous manures such as guano were established as the preferred choice for yielding better results on Essex clays than phosphate manures as used by local farmers.

Exploiting soil potential required a sound technical background. Scottish artifice was equally impressive in transforming trade with London markets. Essex was recognised as the granary of London, but migrant farmers utilized excellent rail connections to London, especially following the construction of the London, Tilbury and Southend Railway to sell milk which paid better than general stock-keeping and arable production.¹³¹ Prior to their arrival, the miniscule Essex 'milk-trade' was hardly worthy of the epithet.

4.4.4 Did the Scots Have an Unfair Advantage?

Scottish migrant farmers to Essex secured short-term leases, removing the fear of a debt burden that could last for fourteen to twenty-one years, the length of normal tenancy agreements. Free from this unnecessary pressure, more imaginative and experimental farming was possible. By the 1890s one-year terms were increasingly adopted in Essex. Migrant farmers also proved particularly adept at extracting money for building improvements as examples from the Petre estate demonstrated, simultaneously undermining the landlordist complaint that as a class they were impoverished by further tenant demands on their cash. Scots farmers were used to sturdy structures made from stone, even for minor farm buildings. In Essex, stone was used sparingly in domestic construction as native timber was favoured. When initially constructed, such buildings were equal in quality to anything built of stone, but when wood rotted over time and structures settled down "off the plumb", timber buildings rapidly deteriorated.¹³² McConnell's assessment that cheap land would have to accompany such a ramshackled structure to 'catch the north country man' revealed the recognition by Scottish farmers of Essex landlord desperation that enabled migrants to bargain for better farm infrastructures. Pringle drew a finer distinction between building types. The liberal expenditure on cow-houses from the early 1880s by landlords reflected the arrival of the Scots. In contrast, Pringle found on locally-tenanted farms barns, wagon-sheds and cattle yards were 'wretched in the extreme'. Pringle concluded native Essex farmers got an unfair deal in comparison with immigrant tenants. He extrapolated his results to claim a definite north/south divide existed across England whereby farmers from northern England tended to secure more robust farm structures because, and this is crucial, they demanded them or built them themselves.¹³³

Labouring cottages were also poor and inadequate, a problem caused by the predominance of small landowners in Essex.¹³⁴ A survey carried out in the Chelmsford and Maldon Rural Sanitary Districts uncovered few cottages with adequate sewage systems, with household wastes emptied into pits known locally as "bumbies".¹³⁵ Pringle did uncover some examples where landowners had recently erected new dwellings with lath and plaster or boarded walls with superior sanitation. Again the arrival of Scottish farmers had provided the much needed injection of impetus into Essex agriculture. In a sense resentment was misdirected. Scottish farmers had requested improvements to render property tenantable. Consequently, extra money spent by *landlords* was entirely self-induced by neglected or misdirected investment during the earlier 'Golden Age'.¹³⁶ Couched in such terms, to counter

Scottish aims was tantamount to upholding a legitimacy in leaving poorly constructed properties derelict.

4.4.5 The Reproduction of Scottish Methods

With the vogue for agrarian solutions that embraced social issues such as rural population retention, most obviously expressed through the small holding idea, the Scottish approach was not necessarily desirable in favourable areas. Lowland Scottish methods had been transferred to East Anglia and worked, which suggested agricultural knowledge could move across space. The idea of vernacular agriculture is undermined by migrant successes. However, the adoption of pasture farming was not the real reason behind profitability. McConnell even doubted whether during the early years of depression dairy farming was markedly more profitable than other modes.¹³⁷ Prosperity, alternatively had been achieved by altering *attitudes* to farming. One Essex-Scot did note after having to contend with his Essex neighbours laughing at his techniques, they now followed his example of laying down fields in temporary grass.¹³⁸ Though some Essex farmers adopted pastoralism arable cultivators clearly felt it beneath them to learn pastoral techniques. Thus the conversion process all too frequently impoverished farmers. Agrarian knowledge therefore, was consciously spatialised and divided socially. 'Respectable' Essex tenant wives would not contemplate work such as milking.

The Scots in Essex manipulated helpful circumstances to their own gain, obtaining advantageous tenancies denied to Essex farmers and exploiting a gap in the milk-supply trade with London. But their methods could not be replicated across the county or even England. Despite urban expansion, markets for cash crops and dairy produce were not so sizeable to accommodate every farmer. By initiating the milk-trade the Scots carved out a niche which any enterprising Essex farmer would find difficult to challenge. Walter Bear warned a wholesale shift to Scottish methods would probably ruin Essex agriculture. 'It is obvious' he exhorted, 'that anything like a general imitation of their plan would speedily glut the market with milk'.¹³⁹ The Scots were especially pro-active in their approach. Channing advocated a lag time for farmers to 'wait and see' before rushing into conversion, claiming 'all the operations and processes of re-adjustment take a long time and mean investments which do not at once begin to pay'.¹⁴⁰ Scottish farmers were not prepared to delay and thus seized a market share while their Essex neighbours waited for a reversal in fortunes. Though Scottish methods may not have been appropriate to all locations across Essex, the energy levels and positive psychology deployed were desirable qualities that Essex farmers, however entrenched within their old ways needed to follow.

Section Conclusion

This chapter has not sought to differentiate resolute 'facts' from transitory fiction to define agricultural fortunes despite Victorian tastes for realism. Crucially, all sense that myth is inherently false and therefore unworthy of interest must be removed. With the benefit of hindsight many farming reactions were evidently built upon Perry's "misperceptions". Ignorance of economic concepts directed farming responses to what was understood best: the mechanisms of nature and this probably retarded agrarian responses until the report of governmental inquiries such as the 1894-97 Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression confirmed the threat from foreign competition. Despite the untenable position of certain interpretations, all observations are equally valid objects of study because they contain a behavioural component that determined the farming approach. Economic treatise on modern capital flows remained concealed from the attentions of most tenant and freehold farmers. Therefore non-economic explanations seemed real and absolute. A reinterpretation of late nineteenth-century agricultural depression embraces both the certainties and uncertainties of depression as conceived by farmers. Disputing the authority of statistics to which most farmers never had access, forces attention onto differing readings of price collapse. The effects of depression on land utilization, declining investment and ebbing profits are well rehearsed, but less energy has been expended on explaining why farmers chose certain options. Such methods can complement and enhance a comprehension of the phenomenon, but it brings us no closer to a definitive version, which is unrealisable in any case.

The geography of depression is more than a simple process of mapping indices such as bankruptcy or tumbledown. The transcending of space by certain ideas is perhaps of equal interest. This chapter has argued that the major determinant in the depression as conceived by Victorian farmers was the *receipt* of information from a variety of sources ranging from other farmers; sources external to their parish; estate agents; newspapers and the agricultural press. The message was overtly fatalistic and this undoubtedly influenced farming decisions. For the sake of good copy, the media focused on areas with a *reputation* for distress, most notably Essex or on extreme cases of failure, distorting the significance of depression so the extent of failure is exaggerated. Critical to the contemporary assertion of recession were certain parameters to failure. But these were assumed though never stated and remained entirely personal. Thus farmers proclaimed the depression to be the worst ever, that agriculture was essentially moribund. This invented sense of failure is overstated by unsubstantiated recollection and is further compounded by a popular farming belief that agriculture had been abandoned by Parliament. Simultaneously, the press merged

effortlessly into a growing aggregate of conspiratorial groups ranged against farming that included educationalist, politicians and free traders.¹⁴¹

Nevertheless, it is difficult to establish ordinary farmer perceptions.¹⁴² Views were so often obscured by patrician perspectives commonly masquerading as agrarian opinion. With this in mind, the behaviour of farmers, as the Essex case study reveals, provide useful indicators on individual and collective states of mind, countering claims that establishing an agrarian mindset is purely speculative. The enterprise of migrant Scots, though perhaps not as innovative as portrayed in the media, contrasted with the reduplicated methods of local husbandmen. The psychological state of individual farmers determined reactions to financial changes. Rank and file tenant farmers seemed content to retain old methods until markets returned profits despite their increasingly outdated approach in an emergent global agrarian economic order. However, the counter trend to convert to pasture equally reveals an incapacity to adapt imaginatively. Local resentment towards Scottish methods uncovered arable-farmer prejudices towards pasture. Arrogantly assuming cow-keeping to be unscientific, natural grasses were unwittingly laid down as pasture and promptly accelerated the onset of tumbledown. Arable farmers half-heartedly converted to pasture without learning the basic rules and endured a second wave of depression. As examples from Essex demonstrate, it is debatable if farmers understood the reasons why pasture-based activities had been successful. For instance, pasture production rationalised the workforce producing drastic savings on labour bills. Expansion into dairy production could reap rewards in association with novel marketing techniques, such as exploiting the burgeoning urban trade in milk supply with the help of rail links.

Ultimately assessment of the functionalist perspective of the farmer should conclude depression represented a suppression of innovative thought, a dulling of the mind that determined financial outcomes as significantly as any price collapse.¹⁴³ Notably, the presence of tumbledown proved indicative of this process. Its location revealed places where farmers had conceded defeat. Its species composition disclosed whether this most potent symbol of failure had been self-induced. Thus the state of mind so frequently pre-determined by the localism of late-Victorian agriculture not only helped conceive and over-dramatise a sense of depression, but then deadened any reaction to it.

¹George Lambert, a member of the second Royal Commission that investigated agricultural misfortune concluded Essex represented the 'most depressed' county in England. Pringle similarly described the county as 'desolate' in the extreme. Report by Mr George Lambert (1897) Final Report of H.M. Commission appointed to enquire into the subject of Agricultural Depression, 204-225; R.H. Pringle, (1894) Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7400. R.H. Pringle (1894), Supplement to the report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. Assistant Commissioners Report on The Isle of Axholme and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression c7374, 207-341; E. Popkin, *The Agricultural Depression of the Later Nineteenth-century in Central Essex* (Brentwood 1964).

²The farmland of Dengie was located upon stiff blueish-grey or brown clays and proved, even in the best seasons expensive to work. K.W. Smith, *Some Aspects of Agricultural Change 1870-1895 With Special Reference to the Dengie Area of Essex* (unpubl. M.Sc. thesis, University of London 1974).

³Report by G. Shaw Leferve. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence Appendix J. (1896) c8021, 611-614.

⁴Masterman's language, though overtly melodramatic accurately portrayed the local farming despair. Critical comment from locals and Masterman alike were as withered as the state of the industry in Essex. One unidentified observer decried the abysmal level of cultivation in Essex. He notes the steady increase in the agricultural returns of "land laid down to grass". 'It would be better described,' he declares, 'as land which has laid itself down to twitch and thistle'. C.F.G. Masterman (1909) *Op Cit.* 148.

⁵P.J. Perry, *British Farming in the Great Depression 1870-1940*, xxiv.

⁶T.S. Dymond, Report upon the Damage on Agricultural Land caused by the Salt-water Flood of November 29th, 1897 (Chelmsford 1898).

⁷The Commission in its Final Report warned that though local opinion as expressed during the investigation agreed with the description Pringle used to depict Dengie, the scene should not be 'taken as typical of the whole county'. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Final Report. (1897) Cd 8540. Matthews. Minutes of Evidence. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7400-III q61,516-18.

⁸J.B. Harley, Maps, Knowledge, and Power, in D. Cosgrove and S. Daniels (Eds) *The Iconography of Landscape* (Cambridge 1988) 299.

⁹K.W. Smith, *Op Cit.*; C.S. Orwin and E.H. Whetham, *Op Cit.*

¹⁰J.W. Root saw the proximity to London as a 'load-stone' cultivating in the minds of 'the ignorant and the ambitious alike' a desire to seek a life away from the plough. J.W. Root, *The Depopulation of the Rural Districts* (Liverpool 1901) 131.

¹¹Large numbers of smaller-scale landowners represented the worst financial situation. The benefit of a large landlords was that they invariably possessed capital to afford rental abatements and continued investment in repairs, drainage and other forms of maintenance. If the arguments of land reformers were accepted, then individual peasant farmers also returned profits through smaller economies of scale and direct receipt of any money received from the sale of farm produce.

¹²It is doubtful that even with paternal sponsorship farmers would have been *willing* to experiment.

¹³Pringle uncovered one small estate near Maldon where the landowner had lost two-thirds of his income derived from rental payments in addition to paying the tithe rates on his tenants behalf, leaving no disposable income for investment in farm buildings that were 'most dilapidated' with cattle yards '...quite unfit for stock, infact they were dangerous'. R.H. Pringle, Assistant Commissioners Report.

¹⁴E.R.O. D/DP 121, Letter to R.H. Pringle from F.J. Coverdale on Small Holdings as a Remedy to Agricultural Depression.

¹⁵E.R.O. D/DP A439, Letter from Edward Fooks to Lord Petre concerning a report submitted by F.J. Coverdale (December 1889) and commenting on the depressed state of agriculture with suggestions of improving the situation with regard to the Thorndon Estate. Letter dated 9 January 1890.

¹⁶Report by Mr F.A. Channing. Final Report of the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression (1897) 227. Cd 8540.

¹⁷A.F.J. Brown, *Meagre Harvest: The Essex Farm Workers Struggle Against Poverty, 1750-1914*, (Chelmsford 1990).

¹⁸The convention of Essex farmers held in Romford under the presidency of Mr T. Mashiter attempted to politically mobilise the farming community by agreeing 'an association should be formed to consist of members pledged not to support any candidate who should not pledge himself if returned to Parliament to vote for an import duty on wheat'. *The Times* 3 July 1879 col. d, 10 - Agricultural Meetings.

¹⁹Report by G. Shaw Leferve. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence Appendix J. (1896) c8021, 611.

²⁰*The Times* 2 July 1879 col. a, 7 - Letter to the Editor by J.J. Mechi.

²¹G.E. Fussell, Essex Farmers of 1850: Men of Enterprise and Capital, *Essex Review* 48 (No. 189) (1939) 40-43.

²²Trist records that the London clays were 'tenacious like glue' during winter. P.J.O. Trist *Land Reclamation* (London 1947); N. Scarfe, The County of Essex - Report of the Land Utilisation Survey of Britain; R.H. Pringle (1894), Essex in Relation to the Grass Question. Supplement to the report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. Assistant Commissioners Report on The Isle of Axholme and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7374, 207-341.

²³A.F.J. Brown, *Op Cit*.

²⁴S.B.C Druce (1881) Report of the Assistant Commissioner on the Eastern Districts. Royal Commission on Agriculture.

²⁵H.C.K. Fitzmaurice and H.H. Smith, Landed Incomes and Landed Estates *Quarterly Review* 166 (1888) 210-239.

²⁶During the first decades of the twentieth century some farms in the Kelvedon and Rodings areas of Essex were attracting over £30 per acre. However, some of these sales recorded prices still lower than the Peewit Island example. The 253 acres of Narswick Farm at Fobbing on the marshes around Canvey Island was sold for £1,725 or £7 an acre. Gooseleys Farm at Toppesfield and Robin Hood Farm at Stambourne, neighbouring villages on the north Essex border by Haverhill were both sold for £10 an acre. The farm sale figures used were collected by Arthur May at auctions in the county between June 1912 and August 1914. A.E. May, What Essex Farms Cost Forty Years Ago *Essex Review* 64 83-85.

²⁷R.H. Pringle (1894), Supplement to the report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. Assistant Commissioners Report on The Isle of Axholme and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7374, 207-341.

²⁸*The Chelmsford Chronicle* 14 September 1879, col. e, 7 - The Price of Land in Essex.

²⁹R.E. Prothero, *The Agricultural Depression and the Sufferings of the Clergy* (London 1887) i.

³⁰R.H. Pringle (1894), Supplement to the report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. Assistant Commissioners Report on The Isle of Axholme and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7374, 207-341.

³¹Essex tenant farmers were not so easily convinced Essex landowners had done enough to ensure tenant solvency. One heckler countered Beaumont's assertion by shouting 'what is the cause of the great number of sale?', implying that tenants were forced to sell up because they had not received the financial backing bound up with traditional conventions of rural responsibility. *The Chelmsford Chronicle* 24 October 1879, col. a-f, 3 - The Farmer's Alliance at Colchester.

³²Land reformers were less accommodating to any vision depicting landlordism in a less harsh light, drawing attention to the mercilessness of tenant eviction prior to depression where rental arrears had grown unacceptably large.

³³Small fruit farms had existed throughout East Anglia for some time. Mechi was the first at Tiptree to develop cash crops into a large commercial sector. G. Robinson, *Agricultural Change: Geographical Studies of British Agriculture* (Edinburgh 1988) 103

³⁴R. Brazier, *The Empty Fields - The Agricultural Strike of 1914* (London 1989) 4; A.F.J. Brown, *Op Cit.*

³⁵'The truth is that the labourers were never so well off as they are at the present time. Wages are higher and food and clothing are cheaper than they have ever been before'. A. Goldring, *The Agricultural Labourer Essex Review* 4 (No. 13) (1895) 25-28.

³⁶A letter between Charles Rumboll and Rev. Abraham Rumboll, an Essex clergyman, testifies that an increasingly transient labourforce was not conducive to rural stability, contending labourers were not bettering their position by moving between farms. Ultimately the countryside lost out as labourers did not secure superior rates of pay and farmers were confronted with labour shortages. Essex Record Office, Letters on the State of British Agriculture 1872-1897, D/DU 559/30 - Letter between Mr Charles Rumboll and Rev. Abraham Rumboll (13 October 1893). *The Chelmsford Chronicle* 5 September 1879, col. d, 6 - Agricultural Notes.

³⁷W.E. Bear, *The Agricultural Labourer Quarterly Review* 178 (1894) 504-530.

³⁸The Dengie area between the Rivers Crouch and Blackwater won praise at the 1873 Essex Agricultural Show held at Maldon prompting Col. Brise M.P. to comment 'the Dengie Hundred, as we all know is one of the most highly cultivated and best farmed districts in the county of Essex, and the agriculturalists and employers of labour in the Dengie Hundred are some of the business like men and most experienced farmers in the county'. *Essex Weekly News* 7 July 1873.

³⁹E. Howard, *Essex Hedgerows as Landmarks of History - The Passing of the Manorial System Essex Review* 20 (No. 78) (1911) 57-74.

⁴⁰'I walked over a great deal of land that I would not have taken for nothing'. R.H. Pringle (1894), Supplement to the report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. Assistant Commissioners Report on The Isle of Axholme and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7374, 207-341; Popkin, *Op Cit.*

⁴¹*The Times* 13 April 1896 col. a, 13.

⁴²Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence with Appendices. Appendix C7 (1896) c8021, 594-595.

⁴³Report by G. Shaw Leferve. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence Appendix J. (1896) c8021, 612.

⁴⁴R.H. Pringle (1894), Supplement to the report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. Assistant Commissioners Report on The Isle of Axholme and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7374, 207-341

⁴⁵An important qualification is that not all 'in hand' land was actually unfarmed. Rather the term refers to *unoccupied* land.

⁴⁶R.H. Pringle (1894), Supplement to the report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. Assistant Commissioners Report on The Isle of Axholme and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7374, 207-341.

⁴⁷F.J. Coverdale, Report on Agricultural Depression as it Affected the Thorndon Estate, E.R.O. D/DP E17.

⁴⁸The rent on this 950 acre farm had been reduced from £1,184 to £741 per annum, and this probably secured the profits recorded. Report by Mr George Lambert (1897) Final Report of H.M. Commission appointed to enquire into the subject of Agricultural Depression, c8540 204-225.

⁴⁹R.H. Pringle (1894), Supplement to the report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. Assistant Commissioners Report on The Isle of Axholme and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7374, 207-341. Fooks similarly suggested that capital gains in the grazing districts of middle Essex had been realized by farmers investing in the cattle and sheep (specifically wool) trades. E.R.O. D/DP A439, Letter from Edward Fooks to Lord Petre concerning a report submitted by F.J. Coverdale (December 1889) and commenting on the depressed state of agriculture with suggestions of improving the situation with regard to the Thorndon Estate. Letter dated 9 January 1890.

⁵⁰Agricultural Returns show the number of animal heads in the county rose during the corresponding period. The number of cattle grew from 72,932 in 1894 to 97,661 in 1906, an increase of 33.9%.

⁵¹R.H. Pringle (1894), Supplement to the report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. Assistant Commissioners Report on The Isle of Axholme and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7374, 207-341.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Along with land simply left to degenerate, land sown with rye grass and left alone or had become overrun with weeds accounted for up to 60% of abandoned land in Essex. R.H. Pringle (1894), Supplement to the report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. Assistant Commissioners Report on The Isle of Axholme and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7374, 207-341.

⁵⁴The field in question belonged to Haseleigh Farm. A report of the conversion process revealed an inordinate amount of twitch grass was brought to the surface following the eventual plough up. Ibid.

⁵⁵H.R. Haggard, *Rural England*, 466.

⁵⁶The 1896 wheat acreage increased to 109,064 and continued to increase to reach 122,020 acres in 1906. Interestingly the barley acreage declined sharply by 31,078 acres (-31%) during the conversion back to arable production. The suggestion that the barley acreage was merely replaced by wheat can be countered, though not conclusively, by a similar decline in the number of sheep from 292,090 in 1896 to 212,975 in 1905, a reduction of 27%. One can conclude that the physical mapping of depression onto the local landscape based upon farming responses had been short term and was highly responsive to the whim of the farmer. Brown, *Op Cit.*

⁵⁷An article in *The Times* on uncultivated land found that farms that had their *arable* portion of land out of production was absolutely negligible. In Hampshire and Dorset no cases were recorded. Suffolk recorded twenty farms and Huntingdonshire, perhaps the most famously depressed county after Essex, just five cases of total abandonment. *The Times* Land out of Cultivation 13 April 1896 col. a, 13.

⁵⁸R.H. Pringle (1894), Supplement to the report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. Assistant Commissioners Report on The Isle of Axholme and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7374, 207-341

⁵⁹'...nothing is more difficult than to ascertain what is the real extent of the depression, over how large a portion of England it prevails, and how far it is due to permanent or temporary causes'. *The Saturday Review* 675-76.

⁶⁰Brian Harley refers to this process as the 'duality of the map', alternatively the assumption of cartographic symbolism from cartographic 'fact'. J.B. Harley, *Op Cit.* 299

⁶¹'It would seem that some of the landlords in the earlier period of depression did not fully recognise the serious nature of the calamity which was impending, and did not reduce the rents soon enough or sufficiently'. Report by G. Shaw Leferve. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence Appendix J. (1896) c8021, 613.

⁶²Perry suggests that although most landowners were relatively worse off after depression than members of the tenant and labouring classes, most were still better off than other classes. P.J. Perry (1974) *Op Cit.*

⁶³H.R. Haggard (1902), *Op Cit.* Vol. I. 438.

⁶⁴Report by Mr F.A. Channing. Final Report of the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression (1897) Cd 8540, 227

⁶⁵According to the survey by Bateman, less than 35% of Essex was held by large landowners, that was owners of 3,000 acres or more. This compared with over 50% in counties like Shropshire. Shaw-Leferve concluded thus: 'with the exception of Lord Petre...there are no large landowners. Much of the land is held by absentees - by corporates such as the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, Guy's Hospital, Saint Bartholomews' and The Charterhouse'. Report by G. Shaw Leferve. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence Appendix J. (1896) c8021, 613. J. Bateman, *The Great Landowners of Great Britain* (London 1883).

⁶⁶F.J. Coverdale, the Petre family agent and therefore perhaps not the most reliable witness testified to the liberal tendency of the family. One of the most obvious manifestations of their ideology was that rental levels had always been held at lower levels than neighbouring properties. F.J. Coverdale, Report on Agricultural Depression as it Affected the Thorndon Estate (Supplement), E.R.O. D/DP E17.

⁶⁷Near to Thorndon Park, the Petre family own 1100 acres at Ingatestone and Fryerning. The estate at Dengie had been purchased in the 1844 at the height of the high farming era. By the second wave of depression from the middle of the 1880s, the property had become a severe financial drain. Rents were reduced from an average of £1687 between 1876-1880 to £841 by 1892, a reduction of £846 or just over 50%. In 1884-85 receipts from the Dengie estate dropped as low as £461. Not everyone in Southminster however, regarded the label as the core of depression as fair. Indeed Shaw-Leferve found the local clergyman in ebullient mood over the prospects and past successes of the local farmers, finding little difficulty in the collection of the tithe. F.J. Coverdale, Report on Agricultural Depression as it Affected the Thorndon Estate (Supplement), E.R.O. D/DP E17. Report by G. Shaw Leferve. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence Appendix J. (1896) c8021, 611-614.

⁶⁸Report by G. Shaw Leferve. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence Appendix J. (1896) c8021, 611-614.

⁶⁹F.J. Coverdale, Report on Agricultural Depression as it Affected the Thorndon Estate (Supplement), E.R.O. D/DP E17.

⁷⁰East Horndon Hall farm was situated on the difficult soils on the southern portion of the estate. Thorndon Estate Cash Accounts 1884-1892, E.R.O. D/DP A381-394.

⁷¹The Home Farm covered 250 acres, comprising 125 acres of what Coverdale described as 'fine grass land'. F.J. Coverdale, Report on Agricultural Depression as it Affected the Thorndon Estate (Supplement), E.R.O. D/DP E17.

⁷²Thorndon Estate Press Copy Account and Letter Book (1899-1910), E.R.O. D/DP A380.

⁷³F.J. Coverdale, Report on Agricultural Depression as it Affected the Thorndon Estate (Supplement), E.R.O. D/DP E17.

⁷⁴W.L. Huskinson. Minutes of Evidence. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression (1894) c7400-I, q957 and 981.

⁷⁵Thorndon Estate Cash Accounts 1884-1892, E.R.O. D/DP A381.

⁷⁶As English notes, rents were always paid in arrears, often up to four months after Lady Day or Michaelmas, the preferred dates of half-yearly rents. However, the arrearage under examination here is the level carried over from not only one half-year to the next but also from one year to another. B. English, *Op Cit.*

⁷⁷Lady Day is 25 March, Michaelmas is 29 September.

⁷⁸This observation concords with landlord protestations over difficulties in planning effective business strategies.

⁷⁹The decline in the number of tenants did not necessarily reflect the number of abandoned farms for that year as there was a long tradition of other Petre tenants taking over additional holdings, temporarily or perhaps with a long-term view to expanding their holding. *Ibid.*, E.R.O. D/DP A405-407.

⁸⁰F.J. Coverdale, Report on Agricultural Depression as it Affected the Thorndon Estate (Supplement), E.R.O. D/DP E17.

⁸¹Thorndon Estate Cash Accounts 1884-1892, E.R.O. D/DP A397.

⁸²F.J. Coverdale, Report on Agricultural Depression as it Affected the Thorndon Estate (Supplement), E.R.O. D/DP E17.

⁸³P. Horn, When the Scots Moved South *The Countryman* 80-84.

⁸⁴Over twenty Scottish farmers settled in Suffolk in the same period. Similar to their Essex-Scots cousins, they were renowned for experimental achievements, specialising in milk, beef and pork production. D. Dymond and P Northwest, *A History of Suffolk* (Chichester 1985); A.F.J. Brown, *Op Cit.*

⁸⁵D Smith, *Op Cit.* 23.

⁸⁶The local four-course system based upon wheat, bare fallow, root crops such as turnips and finally a succession of legumes including English broad red clover, beans and peas. Francis Allston Channing suggested Essex farmers should look to Scotland to recognise the problems with rigid adherence to the four-course system which required large amounts of tenant capital and the intensive application of labour, demands the typical Essex farmer could not satisfy. F.A. Channing, *The Commission on Agriculture Fortnightly Review* 62 (new series) 459-463.

⁸⁷McConnell held a farm near Ongar on some of the stiffest clays in Essex. The farm, consisting of 630 acres cost £500 per annum to rent and the total capital holding represented £8 per acre or £5,000 altogether. Following expenses McConnell still gained a personal profit of £100 per year through 560 acres of pasture-based farming. McConnell cultivated just 70 acres of arable and intended to reduce this figure further. Report by G. Shaw Leferve. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence Appendix J. (1896) c8021, 611-614.

⁸⁸The Scots by reducing the number of fields that had been left as fallow, cut a major source of employment for labouring women, who had previously been used to eradicate the growth of twitch while the field was rested, a job for which they got 8s a day in addition to chronic back-ache. P. McConnell, Experiences of a Scotsman on the Essex Clays *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 2 (3rd Series) (1891) 311-325; D. Smith, *Op Cit.* 53.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*

⁹⁰*Ibid.*

⁹¹The question has to be raised whether Essex-Scots were really innovative or fortunate in their exploitation of landowner circumstances. Furthermore the expectant look from some farming experts towards the Scottish solution as a reproducible method across England conformed to the general longing from within the farming community for a 'grand plan' that could be universally applied across England to resolve depression.

⁹²The investigative work of George Lambert detecting growing consternation with restrictive cultivation uncovered unnamed Essex examples of men that attached 'very great importance to freedom of the sale of produce'. G. Lambert, Report of Mr George Lambert, Final Report of the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression (1897) cd 8540, 204-225.

⁹³Anon., The Essex Agricultural Labourer *Essex Review* 2 no. 8 (1893) 198-199.

⁹⁴F.J. Coverdale, Letter to R. Hunter Pringle, 6 December 1893, E.R.O. D/DP 121.

⁹⁵P. McConnell (1891), *Op Cit.*

⁹⁶'There is not the least doubt that the depression has been very badly felt in some parts of Scotland, especially the eastern agricultural half; but the dairy districts were the last to feel the storm, and have weathered it best'. P. McConnell, *Op Cit.*

⁹⁷A.F.J. Brown (1990), *Op Cit.*

⁹⁸E. Popkin, *Op Cit.*

⁹⁹Lord Petre, being the largest landlord in the area was accredited with the inspiration behind the recruitment of Scottish tenants. D. Smith, *Op Cit.* 53.

¹⁰⁰At the ironically named Barley Lands Farm £4,000 was spent building a new farmhouse, cottages and general farm buildings upon the arrival of new Scottish tenant Mr Adam. Similarly on Bacons Farm, Mountnessing Hall Farm, Cowbridge Grange Magna and Woodbarns Farm capital was expended on dairy accommodation to suit the new pastoral vogue. F.J. Coverdale, Report on Agricultural Depression as it Affected the Thorndon Estate (Supplement), E.R.O. D/DP E17.

¹⁰¹P. Horn, *Op Cit.*; P. McConnell (1891), *Op Cit.*

¹⁰²R.H. Pringle (1894), Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. c7374.

¹⁰³P. McConnell (1891) *Op Cit.*

¹⁰⁴R.H. Pringle, (1894) Assistant Commissioners Report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. c7374.

¹⁰⁵Essex farmers drew offence at Scotchmen 'who have come along with their large families and sacked all their workmen, while their own sons and daughters in stockingless feet, milk the cows at five o'clock in the morning'. E. Popkin, *Op Cit.*

¹⁰⁶P. Horn, *Op Cit.*

¹⁰⁷Hon. E.G. Strutt, Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence. (1894).

¹⁰⁸Report by Mr George Lambert (1897) Final Report of H.M. Commission appointed to enquire into the subject of Agricultural Depression, 204-225.

¹⁰⁹'Unfortunately some of the proprietors of the district have formed the idea that cows impoverish the land and refuse to let their farms to dairymen, and thus in spite of all the evidence that has been made public on the matter respecting the small amount of fertility removed in milk and the large amount returned in cake and meal.' P. McConnell, *Op Cit.*

110P. McConnell (1891), *Op Cit.*

111R.H. Pringle (1894), Supplement to the report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. Assistant Commissioners Report on The Isle of Axholme and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7374, 207-341

112The more unworkable the soil, the more horses were required to pull a plough. Essex clays when wet were notoriously hard to work, but evidently this was not the case across the county.

113However, if Essex farmers attempted to convert back to arable farming then they would potentially come up against the same problem.

114H.E. Wenden of the Tendring Hundred Farmers Association countered that the depression at forced Essex farmers to be less wasteful. H.R. Haggard (1902), *Op Cit.* Vol. I. 453.

115R.H. Pringle (1894), Supplement to the report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. Assistant Commissioners Report on The Isle of Axholme and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7374, 207-341.

116The general consensus was that Ayrshire breed proved better milkers than shorthorns, the preferred breed of cattle amongst the East Anglian farmers that converted to pasture.

117Report by Mr George Lambert (1897) Final Report of H.M. Commission appointed to enquire into the subject of Agricultural Depression. c8540. 204-225.

118P. McConnell (1891), *Op Cit.*

119Anon., The Essex Agricultural Labourer *Essex Review* 2 no. 8 (1893) 198-199.

120R.H. Pringle (1894), Supplement to the report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. Assistant Commissioners Report on The Isle of Axholme and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7374, 207-341.

121The farms were either quite unoccupied, worked by the landlord, or the old tenant was leaving in any case, and if the North-Countryman had not arrived there would have been no tenant at all'. P. McConnell (1891), *Op Cit.*

122N. Scarfe, *The Suffolk Landscape* (London 1972).

123This theory borrows the same assertion of the land reformers, that cultivation offering individual gain induced greater effort.

124Based upon the experiences of the tenants under his jurisdiction, F.J. Coverdale firmly believed the Scotsman possessed greater energy than his English counterpart. F.J. Coverdale, Letter to R. Hunter Pringle, 6 December 1893, E.R.O. D/DP 121.

125The report claimed farmers were only cheating themselves by failing to keep the spread of weeds under control. 'If the crops are starved by the misappropriation of nutrients, the most skilful garnering and after treatment will not recover the loss'. At the onset of depression J.J. Mechi wrote in despair 'I passed through seventy miles of Essex this week. Barley were distressingly yellow and waterlogged. Both wheat and barley fields were bright with crops of Charlock (wild mustard) in full bloom. Hand-hoeing has been impossible so weeds are supreme, and the labourers earning have been small', identifying the lack of maintenance to be the primary reason for field decay. Anon., Notice about the Essex Agricultural Society's Report on their Wheat-Growing Experiments *Essex Review* 2 no. 8 (1893) 198; *The Times* 2 July 1879 col. a 6 - Letter to the Editor by J.J. Mechi.

126What McConnell seems to disregard is that his own great source of knowledge really only stemmed from moving four hundred miles south. He indeed farmed only by the methods he knew best. P. McConnell (1891), *Op Cit.*

127'...one sometimes wonders whether the old spirit of enterprise and thrift which made Essex in earlier days a leader in adapting herself to altered conditions, has quite definitely died out.' E. Howard (1911), *Op Cit.*

128*The Preston Guardian* 24 October 1896. Quote extracted from T.W. Fletcher, 'The Great Depression of English Agriculture 1873-96' *Economic History Review* 13 (2nd series) (1961) 417-432.

129Anon., Review of a fiction entitled 'Tillers of the Soil' *Essex Review* 20 no. 79. (1911) 162.

130J.E. Patterson, *Tillers of the Soil*, (London 1910).

131E.H. Whetham, *The Changing Cattle Enterprises of England and Wales 1870-1910* *The Geographical Journal* 129 (1963) 378-379.

132'The farmhouses as a general rule are good. Not so the farm buildings'. R.H. Pringle (1894), Supplement to the report on Ongar, Chelmsford, Maldon and Braintree Districts of Essex. Assistant Commissioners Report on The Isle of Axholme and Essex. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. c7374, 207-341.

133Ibid.

134J.W. Martin revealed that because of the rural exodus in Essex, landowners were not committing capital to cottage maintenance. He uncovers a grave example in the parish of Stebbing, wherein 52 empty cottages could be found, many in a derelict state. Constance Cochcrane propounded the relationship between landowning capital and the ability to maintain the quality of cottage accommodation. The worst landowners were retired farmers and small village tradesmen with little disposable income to apply to renovation. J.W. Martin, *The Ruin of Rural England* (London 1901) 2; C. Cochcrane, *Papers on Rural Housing - The Present Condition of the Cottage Home of the Agricultural Labourer* (St Neots 1901) 4.

135Anon., *The Housing of the Agricultural Labourer in Essex* *Essex Review* 1 (1892) 51-54.

136P. McConnell (1891), *Op Cit.*

137Ibid.

138'The Essex farmers say that experience shows tat the grass will not last, and they do not think profit can be made from temporary grass'. Report by G. Shaw Leferve. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Minutes of Evidence Appendix J. (1896) c8021, 611-614.

139W.E. Bear, *Perish Agriculture!* *Quarterly Review* 180 406-430.

140F.E. Channing, *The Truth About Agricultural Depression* (London 1897) xv.

141Chapter Three develops the point further.

142The opinion of labourers was practically absent from any discussion despite Joseph Arch's assertion, referenced earlier, that the tillers of the soil knew its fortunes best. The National Agricultural Labourers' Union proposed the establishment of an inquiry into what the most intelligent of labourers conceived to be the causes of depression. *The Times* 20 September 1879 col. f, 6 - Farm Labourers and the Agricultural Commission.

143Unimaginative farming practices prompted Spencer Walpole to declare the 'active ingenuity' of American farmers had undone the British farmer. S. Walpole, *The State of Agriculture at Home and Abroad* *Edinburgh Review* 157 (1883) 138-167.

Section Two

The Condition of Rural England: Race, Patriotism and Agricultural Depression, 1879-1914

All...observations...are faced with some fundamental difficulties. One of these is the difficulty of ascertaining where the essential nation resides: what spirit and temper, in what particular class or locality, will stand to the future for twentieth-century England.

C.F.G. Masterman

The Condition of England (1907), 13.

Introduction

Local into National: The Transformation of Depression

Agricultural depression, as formulated within the local milieu, represented a mediation of parochial myths and anxieties, largely based upon personal experience. Similarly, this process was extended and repeated at a national level. The transfer of meanings between individual and society was instigated in an array of books and pamphlets written on depression with a sensitivity to rural issues. However, locally specific judgements were intentionally and unintentionally magnified to depict a pall of depression cast over agriculture that not only rejected the presence of a detailed topography of failure, but also succumbed to an imposition of numerous ideological tenets and broader social and cultural fears. Thus the concept of depression shifted from expressing individual financial errors to become a representation of national degeneracy, bound up in a 'crisis of ideas', the wider cultural insecurity over challenges to established icons of nationhood. This section aims to explore the embellishment of agrarian depression with wider social meaning by focusing firstly on the evolution of a series of motifs of farming failure, and secondly by examining how the depression-induced rural exodus provoked fears for the survival of the English racial lifeblood. As Rider Haggard, one of the foremost rural observers of the day concluded, 'behind the agricultural question lies the national question', and it is within this relationship between agriculture and a notion of nationhood that evidence for a reconceptualisation of farming failure resides.¹

So far, this thesis has disclosed insights into how the farming industry constructed plausible interpretations of economic failure, its causes and its manifestations. Critically however, there exists a need to comprehend broader conceptualisations of farming failure from beyond the agricultural sector and understand the scripting of a new theorization for widespread consumption in the

public domain. A series of rural geographic imaginations emerged reflecting conceptual difference between Ruralists, the campaigners who sought a more truthful depiction of the countryside, and romantic idyllicists: a dialectic reconciled by the shared need for a rural revival and the enhancement of agriculture. My approach aims to reveal some of the semiological meanings attached to depression. This involves comprehending contemporary tensions and contradictions of re-fabricating the rural environment in response to agrarian depression and consumed by a non-agrarian, non-rural public. More popularist visions reflected urban delineations of a countryside resplendent in hues of green, a haven of abundance that owed more to Picturesque bucolic depiction than agrarian reality. Thus a conflict arose between urban idealisation and a rural envisionment of itself.

This discussion signifies, primarily, an attempt to discern the interplay between divergent representations of the rural milieu and agriculture in particular. Initially investigation will focus upon identifying broader national anxieties and how by eschewing technical data in favour of spiritualism and mysticism, the countryside was transformed into a space within which these apprehensions could be resolved. To confront romanticism, a Condition of Rural England discourse was formulated to convince a neglectful and uninformed wider audience of the parlous state of farming. This movement may usefully be labelled 'Ruralist' on account of its attempt to clarify disparate meanings associated with agriculture, with the interests of authentic people and places at the fore. However, mindful of the readership Ruralist texts addressed, usually urban and middle-class, authenticated accounts from the countryside often drew upon concepts and a language in common usage amongst more poetical bucolic representations. The *content* of the literature that made the transition from English arcadianism to 'rural realism' as exemplified by the Condition of Rural England dialogue is of interest to us here. Critically, this allows reference to broader themes within the thesis, most obviously the enunciation of depression as a cultural construction, in essence a psychological manifestation of a number of late nineteenth-century fears. Secondly, the Ruralist movement was not divided along traditional political and ideological boundaries affirming the existence of a specific 'Ruralist' ideal beyond traditional Left and Right orthodoxies. A southern spatial bias of locations scrutinised by figures like Haggard and F.E. Green revealed a non-political consensus in regard to definitions of a national homeland. A second Ruralist ideal arose in response to the growing dereliction of the countryside with the theorization of an aesthetic based upon utility and beauty through productive effort. The final theme raised is the location of specific types of agrarian knowledge, both technical and idyllic, revealing the division between local and national conceptions of depression and the state of the countryside which the Condition of Rural England movement attempted to bridge. Information was ordered spatially, both vertically between nation-

state and the parochial level and horizontally between parishes or the micro-scale of neighbouring farms, hence divergent representations of depression.

The second half of the section will move beyond the resurrection of 'Condition of Rural England' literature to consider how the Ruralist discourse was initially fuelled by, and eventually emerged as a chief determinant within, fears of physical degeneracy and an attendant symbolic destruction of an English racial ideal. Shaped by perceived manpower problems exerted materially upon farmers by the rural exodus and subconsciously by the *vogue* for environmental determinist theories of physical decay, a concern for the continued survival of the ideal *Englishman*, the mystical yeoman farmer and his modern-day descendant, the agricultural labourer, infused Condition of Rural England literature. By examining the language of state-sponsored reports and accounts of the increasing failure of the army to recruit physically able soldiers, the myth of the soldier-farmer will be explored while attempting to understand the causal role agricultural depression played in manipulating recruitment anxieties, tracing its subsequent negation in favour of other issues such as a nationwide programme of physical training; the inhumanity of urban residence and the fear of a "nation of Cockneys", alternatively a pre-eminence of the town-bred.

The significance of depression can therefore be understood beyond farming economics. Agriculture evinced greater symbolic interest than any other English industry, despite the critical role in the national economy being forsaken. Even pessimists such as Henry Chaytor were moved to write 'land is the backbone of every nation, and its depression reacts on all other industries'.² By reconfiguring known readings of agriculture to embrace late Victorian/early Edwardian discourses of patriotism or degeneracy and decay, this section will attempt to contribute to what Cloke and Thrift have identified as a shift in 'writing the rural' to embrace wider cultural formations such as nationhood and the territorialization of space.³ The ultimate aim, is to portray late nineteenth-century agricultural depression as a multi-dimensional form.

The State of the Nation

Historians of the period have repeatedly cited the intellectual challenge to established English political and cultural orders at the end of the nineteenth century as a primary impulse behind Victorian re-evaluations of national identity and the maintenance of a flourishing racial succession.⁴ To compensate for breathtaking and relentless re-orientation in English social and economic life, there emerged from within the urban bourgeoisie an urgency to turn inwards, to seek the essence of race and social cohesion. An 'imagined community' recently conceptually reworked by Benedict Anderson, was fabricated to locate a new industrial-capitalist 'English' culture within some sense of historical legitimacy whilst predicating a persuasive national ideal that

celebrated England's old rural order.⁵ This 'national construction of social space' through a portrayal of England as essentially rural enabled the evolution of a 'Merrie England' myth within both Conservative and Radical factions, celebrating rural England for its beauty, virtue and timelessness, creating a series of rustic patinas that obscured less romantic realities.⁶ Increasingly sharper definitions of an English rural homeland festooned the countryside with the symbolism of a national spiritual heart: its occupants rendered racial lifeblood and as such, their lifestyle and space within which they subsisted transformed into referential points of veneration. Shifts in society to an urban-based population sharpened a romantic vision of history, fuelled by the absence of a *collective* memory of the peasant past.⁷ Unfortunately, a love of the rural *past* became more than a sentimental indulgence and increasingly the rural *present* was subsumed into idyllic myth.⁸ The contemporary rural milieu was re-interpreted as a simulacrum of national bucolic idealism with a consequent abandonment of the mundane and brutal indigence of village life for more arcadian iconography, representative of 'real' England.⁹ Icons of Victorian rurality, namely toil, morality and contentment through effort were appropriated during this critical definition of English consciousness as the countryside was re-affirmed as the national spiritual homeland.¹⁰ Such a potent symbol as the rural idyll was crucial to nineteenth-century cultural discourses because, as Nead identifies, it soothed the Victorian psyche, providing confirmation and reassurance.¹¹

Critically, from the middle decades of the nineteenth-century a 'state of the nation' discourse was advanced amongst a number of prominent political and intellectual figures such as C.F.G. Masterman, G.K. Chesterton and Hillaire Belloc. This questioned directions the nation had pursued economically and socially, in a reaction against industrial-capitalist 'progress' and an attendant sense of degeneracy from traditional values.¹² Fiona MacCarthy claimed that by the 1840s, the 'condition of England' question was 'obsessing and dividing more liberally inclined professional families'.¹³ A Condition of England debate arose through a treatise by John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold questioning the moral and ethnic implications of urban-industrialism. The ensuing polemic was primarily concerned with urban issues, fuelled initially by the writing of Dickens and the Chadwick reports and culminated half a century later in the work of 'General' Booth, Seebohm Rowntree and others. Debate was pursued through a series of texts, of which *The Condition of England* (1907) by Charles Masterman and *England: A Nation* (1904) edited by Lucien Oldenshaw for The Patriot Club (featuring papers by Chesterton, Belloc and R.C.K. Ensor) were the most widely-read. This literature attempted to (re)define England within a comprehensive cultural, political and intellectual framework in response to cosmopolitan threats to English racial lineage from an urban-bred population and imperial expansion by adapting rural iconography into easily identifiable and stable

forms of Englishness, constructing a Pastoral national core that approximated with the cultural parameters defining 'Merrie England'.

By subscribing to a 'Little England' philosophy favouring the promotion of national culture and patriotism over the 'false jingoism of imperialism', numerous essays attacked moral and physical racial decay. A series of pertinent questions were posed within the redefinition of English national identity that attempted to understand perceived degeneracy and a pervading sense of national pessimism incurred by the new order.¹⁴ Bound up within this process of definition was the explicit territorialization of space, which as James Anderson asserted, develops as a critical component of nationhood. Within the limited and discrete spatial entity that is the nation, asseveration of difference is posited.¹⁵ Racial, cultural, religious and linguistic distinctions are celebrated. At a time of cultural disorder and jingoistic overtures from the Imperial periphery towards the anglo-centric core, many sought to revert the English perspective inwards to redefine itself.¹⁶ The consequent depiction of rural England as a spiritual haven and the last 'real' space of Englishness succumbed to a number of romantic indulgences that not only hindered awareness of actual countryside conditions and financial realities, but managed to overlook the true extent of the agrarian crisis. Evidently for those concerned to project an objective envisionment of the countryside, the 'real' rural had been reduced to a landscape of declining and subordinate power, eclipsed by Pastoral fantasy. Clearly once recognised, if not understood, agricultural depression had impinged on the English psyche at an awkward moment for attempts to revitalise a national consciousness. Thus the need for some form of preservation was given added impetus. A concern for the rural as an ideal existed, but little attention was devoted to the mechanisms of its daily running. Undoubtedly *perceived* depression and its apparent strike at the heart of English national identity was of greater significance to many Victorians than the actual economics of the farming industry.¹⁷

The Condition of Rural England Discourse

It is the expressed aim of this section to move deeper into Condition of England literature to suggest a hitherto ignored rural discourse beyond a 'state of the nation' question existed that displayed greater sensitivity to a functionalist farm perspective than English pastoral idealism. This 'truthfulness' was invoked by conveying the distress of economic failure through 'rural realism', yet still tenaciously observed a romantic grounding, such as the conceptual elevation of an English rural homeland and the role of agriculture as a symbolic component to a reconstituted notion of Englishness.¹⁸ Condition of Rural England writers enabled the easy translation of esoteric farming issues into a language comfortably digested by non-rural residents. This perpetuated the incremental growth of philosophical dimensions to the concept of

depression by imposing a series of simplified meanings. Eschewing technical minutia, though still adhering to a functional content, literary celebration of romantic reference points such as the harvest, reflected an awareness by Ruralist authors of the inclination to recoil at a time of national unease, seeking reassurance from traditional non-material and immutable icons of Englishness.¹⁹ However, in disassembling the pure arcadian imagination, the realist approach of the Ruralists provided unwelcome idealised representations of its own, manifest, for example through a difficulty in obtaining an 'accurate' depiction of the rural labourer. The propensity to apply the term 'Hodge' to labourers, transformed workers from actual and functional representations of his (and the depiction is undoubtedly masculine) class to a poetic fantasy whose very existence expressed pleasurable toil and virtuous endeavour.²⁰ Thus, F.E. Green could earnestly write about the subjugated status of the labourer at the 'unchecked hand or iron' administered by despotic landowners, but when that labourer is personified as 'Hodge', the immediacy and sense of injustice suffered is lost, contaminated by a romantically-loaded vision conjured up by the epithet.²¹

The rural realist movement was not rigidly anti-pastoral and indeed commonly celebrated the farmer and labourer as an English racial archetype. However, the texts of a *Condition of Rural England* thesis have largely receded from modern memory despite Rider Haggard's *tour de force* entitled *Rural England* arousing significant debate at the time of its publication in 1902, largely through its disputation of the authenticity of Picturesque myths.²²

Sensitivity towards the depressed circumstances of farming and a working knowledge of the soil typified the *Condition of Rural England* debate as it attempted to combine agricultural *functionalist* issues with wider national anxieties such as state security, industrial progress and the physical and psychological health of the nation.²³ The depression was swiftly mobilised as an expression of a national moral crisis as well as an economic difficulty. Thus we find both articulate farmers and the 'gentleman' variety as exemplified by Rider Haggard earnestly attempting to portray the hardship and ruin of country life to a largely ignorant public. Politicians, especially those charged with the wanton neglect of agriculture, were also a target audience.²⁴ Legislators, it was contended, possessed no adequate grounding in rural conditions and agricultural perdition. J.W. Martin's attack on Government ignorance reflects this genuine fear, when he states that 'Lord Salisbury's cure [for depression] is rather for a mind disease - he prescribes a circus'.²⁵ In addition, Haggard, recognized a stance on behalf of agriculture was not a popular one.²⁶ His work continually speculated if the dismantling of popular resistance to the farming lobby would expunge a sizeable obstacle to an agrarian solution. 'Perhaps...I may be of service' he helpfully suggests, '...to a cause that seems to have few advocates, and before it is too late, may succeed in bringing home to the minds of some authority in Parliament and the Press, the need

of combating those admitted and far-reaching evils which are involved in the decay of agriculture and in the desertion of the English land by its inhabitants'.²⁷

Encompassed within the Condition of Rural England literature was a movement away from traditional arcadian aesthetic critiques and bucolic landscape theories of rural England in favour of a new *utility* aesthetic based upon spiritualism through productivity. A humanity championed by Ruralist texts placed emphasis on people and their problems. Agricultural depression had exposed a weakened heart as English men and women turned towards a rural homeland for security and salvation. Figures like Haggard and John Wesley Martin realised the notion of rural 'degeneracy' was as tangible as the urban problem documented in the works of Booth and Rowntree. By employing the same spiritual and romantic beliefs that typified Victorian rustic nostalgia, they asserted the countryside occupied a core role within the health of the nation. Therefore farming distress was of equal if not greater importance than urban squalor. Martin, is explicit in this assertion of the 'real' source of national decay. In his book *The Ruin of Rural England* he insisted that '...the rapid decadence of England - physical, moral and material - is most marked in the villages, thirty years ago teeming with population and bustling with prosperity, now exhibiting on every hand, marks of the desolation that is working amongst them'.²⁸ There existed a real concern the nation would turn in on itself only to uncover the erosion of its very heart, its agrarian foundation. This in itself would prove problematic if, as Haggard testified the nation did not swiftly recognize where its true and permanent strength resided.

*Though today they be so poor, yet the might of England is in her villages, those villages so many of whose homes are crumbling, and whose arable fields go back daily to the wasteful and unproductive grass out of which our forefathers reclaimed them.*²⁹

As a result, a direct link between farming, community and nationalism was forged within Condition of Rural England literature. J.W. Martin forebodingly wrote, '...no nation has survived the destruction of its agriculture'.³⁰ By broadening traditional remits for the study of failure, late nineteenth-century agricultural depression can be reconstructed as a multi-faceted economic, social, cultural and political phenomenon.

Chapter Five: Writing the 'Real' Rural: Contested Visions of the English Countryside and the 'Condition of Rural England' Discourse.

5.1 The Condition of England

The Condition of England movement was bound up within an attempt to 'reclaim' England from a series of extraneous influences, most notably increasing imperial dominance of the mainstream political agenda.³¹ Imperialism dissipated the core of national identity, already perceived to be threatened by suspect progress of modernism, by stretching English interests spatially. Caught up in an end of the century angst, commentators such as Masterman and Chesterton feared the consequences of abandoning traditional English values at a time when reinforcement was required. Chesterton, in his autobiography recalled that his political philosophy at the turn of the century had been nationalism not internationalism. '...it seemed obvious that Patriotism and Imperialism were not only *not* the same thing, but very nearly opposite things. But it did not seem obvious, but very puzzling, to the great majority of healthy patriots and innocent imperialists'.³² Agricultural depression compounded the sense that England was increasingly dispossessed of its own heritage by eradicating or transforming the very same conventional icons of rusticity revered by English nationalist campaigns.³³ A movement in response led by Chesterton and others urged a greater sense of *patria* through introspection, less in insularity, but rather to rediscover England, to comprehend a shared concept of identity. 'When patriots suggested we needed to re-conquer England', wrote Masterman, 'the reason why is that we had to, to rescue the nation before our conquering qualities were lost'.³⁴ The Romantic idealisation of the countryside was integrated into this search for nationhood through a celebration of rural England.

5.2 A Specific Rural Dialogue and the Cultural Climacteric

5.2.1 The Emergence of a Rural Literary Genre

Arguably, the 'Condition of Rural England' label represents a contrived aggregation of authors to delineate an emergent *genre* of rural writing, the essence of which lay in the exposition of a rural 'reality'. Certainly, in orthodox political terms little existed to unite an arch-Conservative such as Rider Haggard with other chief protagonists, such as Frederick Ernest Green, an outspoken critic of landlordism and advocate of small holdings. However, rigid and essentially modern political boundaries prove unhelpful. A small but vocal group of critical authors developed ideological connections within

the flexible theories of an unwritten Ruralist agenda, elevating the status of the countryside over urbanist, picturesque and even capitalist concerns.³⁵

Reacting to continued indifference towards the rural cause from politicians, these authors saw themselves as *poets of the soil*, attempting to join popular rustic spiritualism with agricultural 'truths'.³⁶ Green opens his 1912 account of farming distress, *The Awakening of England*, by characterizing William Cobbett in a manner that could well have portrayed the late nineteenth-century rural realist seers, '...he had the eyes of a poet; but unlike most poets, he knew the value of a sheep to a shilling'.³⁷ This combination of farming with fact, as opposed to technical or indulgent romantic narrative was unusual. William Bear had earlier attempted a romantic fantasy of a new agricultural utopia in a small book entitled *An Agricultural Rip van Winkle*. In what was clearly a parody of William Morris's *News From Nowhere*, the central figure in the text, Bear's equivalent to 'Guest', awakes from a forty year sleep to discover that he has been transported to a future England where many of perceived faults of late nineteenth-century agriculture had been eradicated such as game laws that ensured potentially productive land was beyond the hands of peasant cultivators. Bear's allegorical narrative was ripe with references to a number of the 'state of the nation' issues beyond agriculture. For example, 'Guest' encounters what he thinks is a 'rook boy' sitting on a gate. Yet the boy is now the recipient of a good education and instead of chasing the crows he reads a book called 'Elementary Physiology for the use of Schools'.³⁸ Another, more contemporary precursor to the 'agricultural tours' of Haggard and Green was James Long, who in 1880 travelled extensively around Cheshire and neighbouring environs on behalf of *The Manchester Guardian*. An anonymously written article published in the *Quarterly Review* neatly summed up the previous mutual suspicion of associating literature with agriculture, suggesting that Haggard was one of the first authors of the late-Victorian age to successfully combine the two, a direct result no doubt, of his unique position as a fiction writer and flourishing agriculturalist.³⁹

Until the evolution of the Condition of Rural England movement at the end of the nineteenth-century, commentaries on depression or the haemorrhaging of rural labour were generally confined to Royal Commission reports or specialist literature in industry publications such as the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, though the onset of depression did lead to a rash of privately published pamphlets.⁴⁰ A paucity of similar Ruralist literature forced Haggard to conclude that '...few study these dull slow-fruited problems [depression, exodus] and theirs are but voices crying in the wilderness which echo slowly into emptiness and silence'.⁴¹ However, in contradiction to Alun Howkins's recent assertion, the rural realist movement signified more than mere social commentary.⁴² Howkins suggests that '...nobody seriously questioned agricultural productivity or even efficiency', yet the whole reason

behind Ruralist texts was to demonstrate broader national consequences of farming distress and the inability of farmers to out-compete foreign competitors. This they achieved in addition to addressing what J.S. Nicholson claimed was the most important agricultural question of the moment, rural depopulation.⁴³ Naturally, urban social life proved an attraction to many young labourers, but the rural exodus was undoubtedly the result of diminished returns in agriculture and an inability to finance better wages to keep labour on the land.

5.2.2 Three Rural Realist Authors

Three authors have been selected for closer study of what was a broad and generally amorphous movement: H. Rider Haggard, F.E. Green and J.W. Martin. Each indicated the disparities and more subtle nuances of unwritten Ruralist philosophy. The first, and most celebrated writer is the popular adventure fictionalist, Henry Rider Haggard.⁴⁴ Haggard was born at Bradenham, Norfolk in 1856, growing up during the most profitable period of English agriculture, the golden age of high farming.⁴⁵ Through his father's contacts he landed a civil service post in Natal, South Africa. After numerous exciting escapades in Africa which probably inspired his future literary imagination, including a spell as an ostrich farmer within earshot of Anglo/Boer confrontations in the foothills of the Drakensburg mountains, Haggard returned home when fighting became too intense. Initially he read for the Bar, but disinterest in law prompted Haggard to take up writing. His success was not instantaneous, but his highly romanticised descriptions drawn from Africa and a prolific work rate, his most enduring novel, *King Solomon's Mines* was completed in just six weeks, eventually captured the Victorian imagination. *King Solomon's Mines*, *She* and *Allan Quartermain* established Haggard amongst the most popular fiction writers in Britain.⁴⁶ Able to retire from the royalties of a succession of best sellers, Haggard returned to Norfolk purchasing a small estate at Ditchingham to indulge in his real love, farming, writing a series of books on rural issues in Britain and abroad. It was his wish that his rural work would 'preserve a large body of incontestable evidence for the benefit of future generations' and though they never became literary classics, some comfort can be drawn that Haggard refused to fashion them in the swashbuckling style of his African adventures.⁴⁷

The employment of Haggard's rural texts uncovers an apparent conflict between perceived rural realities of insolvency and despair and a sentimental longing for an imagined bucolic past. They also disclose how agricultural depression became a mediation of broader national anxieties, most evidently the crisis of identity. Haggard's initial foray in rural writing, *A Farmer's Year*, published in 1899, revealed an acute sensitivity to the plight of farmers reflected through his own personal experiences; themes developed three years later in his most enduring effort, the



Plate 2: H. Rider Haggard

enormous two-volume *Rural England*.⁴⁸ This *magnum opus*, initially commissioned as articles for the *Daily Express* newspaper, consisted of an investigative trek across England's agricultural counties recording the state of farming with a Domesday-like tenacity in the face of opposition and suspicion, undoubtedly the consequence of his literary background and reputation as a political maverick.⁴⁹

What *Rural England* famously uncovered was a 'forgotten' England, unable to oppugn rapid social and economic upheaval, a turbulent landscape plunged into crisis obscured by a veil of sentimentalism. In a sense the countryside had both feet in the past. Until Haggard's incipient concern for the farmer, few *functionalist* observers had stressed the spiritual and even aesthetic importance of agriculture to the nation.⁵⁰ Haggard related in his autobiography a number of years later, that he had identified with Arthur Young in a need to re-focus awareness of the importance of agriculture. However, the failure of his farming texts to sell agreeably suggested the British public, now firmly a nation of town-dwellers were not prepared to recognise the continued dominance of agricultural interests in shaping national destiny.⁵¹ Resistant to anti-agrarian sentiments, there emerged with the 'Condition of Rural England' debate a desire to vocalise farming communities, recognising that it was people and not an illusory idyll that survived as the critical component for national stability. Haggard's thesis was less a contention agriculture would expire *per se*, but more a fatalistic contemplation of its future form, which would almost certainly reflect the uniformity and mediocrity typical of city life or even worse, modernity, over the vernacular. Large areas of productive land given over to field sports for the enjoyment of an elite few was one obvious consequence. A particularly powerful piece of Haggardian prose vividly illustrates the point.

*I have from time to time been credited with some powers of imagination, but I confess that they fail me when I think of this England of ours, spotted with huge overgrown cities, surrounded each of them by market gardens, and beyond by great stretches of what in Africa we should call veld, that is unimproved or scarcely improved country broken here and there by the mansions of the rich colonials or city men, encircled by their areas of sporting lands.*⁵²

Bucolic romanticism, particularly in art, was atemporal and placeless.⁵³ Conversely, Condition of Rural England texts strived for realism through the naming of actual locations which not only embellished a geography of depression in real space, but also enriched a sense that farming failure was mapped onto the rural landscape beyond the realms of abstract economic theory. Sometimes simple, if rather melodramatic, statements provided stark reminders of how the economic downturn could eradicate any trace of farming activity completely from the soil. Rider Haggard in particular was fond of such presagements, especially in relation to his beloved East Anglia. He was

not alone in making catastrophic assessments, as S.L. Bensusan's much later account of farming in East Anglia attests with his observation that the devastation caused by depression made any observer believe 'there had been a plague here'.⁵⁴

The remaining two authors are less recognisable figures than Haggard and indeed their works have receded from the public imagination. F.E. Green's *The Awakening of England* deviates little from the formula employed by Haggard ten years earlier. Green even revisits a number of locations such as the successful small holding schemes at Winterslow in Wiltshire and Catshill in Worcestershire.⁵⁵ A small holding ideal dominates Green's work, in support of his primary thesis, that the landowning oligopoly no longer offered requisite solutions for overcoming farming recession. Green, in particular, recounts the drudgery of farming stripped of 'Simple Life' romanticism. It is this idyllicism that hindered wider support for technical change. Green recalled the resistance to his lecture advocating the greater utilization of milking-machines because it did not conform with the popular atavistic rustic ideal.⁵⁶ The third author, J.W. Martin, represents an earlier stylised fusion of prosaic investigation and tempered romanticism that typified the *genre* in his solitary publication, *The Ruin of Rural England*. A crucial difference in his approach is an areal concentration of analysis, based heavily on investigations into Essex agriculture. Rehearsing previous commentaries on the state of agriculture in the county, Martin contextualised the local farming crisis within national discourses of failure.⁵⁷ However, he makes numerous broader generalisations about English farming purely from observations within Essex, thus reinforcing a belief in the county as a microcosm of English farming while providing further evidence on how local experiences were easily transmuted into a national occurrence.

Generally, each author would draw upon a series of motifs that placed a division between idealist writing and functionalism. Through continued repetition these emblems were inducted as popular 'truths' about farm failure, becoming standard indicators of depression in the public domain. By personalising evidence through techniques of interview or basic reportage, these critical concomitants, crucial to a wider understanding of depression become highly tangible, a feat not previously achieved by muddled and not especially forthright statements circulated by the second Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression.

5.3 Six Leitmotifs of Failure

Six components were identified within the Condition of Rural England movement as symbols of depression. Interestingly, the symbolism of these elements was reversible in the direction from which their signature was received: formulated at the parochial level, appropriated and embellished at a national scale and then returned back to farming communities as essential 'truths' about agrarian depression. What this rather

simplistic statement reveals is that these themes had meanings transmuted from their origins as local representations of misfortune when placed in the wider public domain by Ruralist writers or technical literature. Their validity as national indicators of depression was authenticated by repetition despite their inappropriateness in explaining economic distress in certain specific locales.⁵⁸ By examining six constituents, it is possible to witness how inherently functional agrarian readings of failure were manipulated into tropes that mediated the prevailing national malaise. The leitmotifs were, firstly, the potent image of a declining patriarchal order which acted as a metaphor for the apparent crisis of direction following the perceived collapse of traditional rural values at the hands of modern industrial capitalism and the stagnation in agricultural affairs.⁵⁹ Connected to the waning *ancien regime* were issues of inadequate housing provision and increased acreages of land given over to field sports, both of which questioned the role of landownership in agricultural production and asseverated the need for greater rural autonomy, especially amongst the labouring classes. Two further constituents within the rural realist encapsulation of depression were mediations of its psychology, both as a dynamic source of mental paralysis and sombre judgement within the farming lobby and as an expression of an English inability to innovate, think positive and adapt traditional practices into efficient methods imperative for the emergent global agrarian economy. The final element embraced an issue extraneous to agriculture: education and the imposition of elementary schools. As each component offered a specific *leitmotif* of failure, it is important this chapter engages in a more detailed discussion on the iconology of failure.

5.3.1 Landlordism

The controversy surrounding landlordism and the control of official debate was addressed in Section Two. However, Condition of Rural England writers repeatedly examined the role landowners played and could play in maintaining financial viability in agriculture. Exploration establishment behaviour within the texts of Green and Haggard revealed the Ruralist desire to revitalise patriotic responsibility amongst landowners with regard to the profitable occupation of the soil. Increasingly, as the nation looked inward, expressions of *patria* were attributed to the smallest of localised actions. Adopting informed landlordism as an inherently patriotic act, an expectancy evolved that greater responsibility could be cultivated amongst those who still controlled the fortunes of agriculture.⁶⁰ By developing *patria* into a series of moral responses, patriotism and responsibility became readily digestible social actions at the local level, which in turn promoted the need for accountable and considered behaviour by those connected to agriculture, be they peasant or peer. In brief, the Ruralist literature seized on loyalty to the land to sharpen notions of patriotic responsibility.

The principle question inquired by Condition of Rural England writers attempted to establish if the manifestation of depression was caused by a dismantling of the old patrician system or perpetrated by the neglectfulness of aristocrats themselves by failing to maintain conventional standards. In the face of trenchant attitudes greater flexibility in the landowning approach was vital to ensure profitable returns in an increasingly competitive and spatially extended market place particularly with regard to land claims. The gradual subsuming of capitalist ideas and practices was readily attributed to greater aristocratic involvement in manufactures and financial houses.⁶¹ Nevertheless, this embrace of free market principles was unable to reverse (or disguise) an undeniable decline in the power exercised by landowning elites. If testimonial evidence before the earlier Royal Commissions was to be believed, agricultural depression had undermining this bedrock of stability. However, such assessments were relative and may well have been actively encouraged by an aristocracy eager to cultivate sympathy.

The Condition of Rural England movement, and F.E. Green in particular, displayed scepticism towards a propitious depiction of the landowning position. The intractable nature of the English farming economy within the new capitalist world system was, for most Condition of Rural England writers, a direct causality of disinvestment, neglect and poor fiscal planning by landowners. Though agreeing with the contention that paternalistic influence was gradually being eclipsed, in fact Green was critical of the false elevation of the aristocratic position, he patently refused to subscribe to an accompanying tendency to attribute blame for farm failure on the increasingly emancipated rural labourer.⁶² Green wrote 'it has been the fashion of what might be termed Victorian writers to extol the influence of the country house and to give it a place which it no longer occupies in the destiny of rural England'.⁶³ Green sensed paternalism produced a pall of 'servility and envy' over village life. He quotes Lady Henry Somerset to illustrate the point, stating '...there is far more spontaneous happiness in a village where there is no great house than even in the best village where everything is beneficially arranged by a great landlord for the benefit of the people'. Seemingly agriculture, social organisation and social control were inextricably linked with the fortunes of each dependent upon the other. Petty-Fitzmaurice and Smith subscribed to the same view, but for very different reasons, anxiously contending labour ignorance would undermine one vital concomitant of the rural milieu: stability. Disclosing flagrant and quite blatantly offensive prejudice, they asserted that though the labourer now claimed greater representation in the management of the countryside, 'he knows little of what is *really* going on, and is ignorant of the justice or injustice of the most important questions of the day'.⁶⁴ Haggard's work vocalises identical complaints from members of the landed elite in which not entirely unreasonable demands from the labouring classes for higher wages, shorter hours and better

accommodation were portrayed as unwelcome distractions and financial burdens at a time when all classes should apparently unite.⁶⁵

Green attempted to counteract pro-landlord literature, as exemplified by the apologist tracts of people like "Templar", the pseudonymed writer who believed old patriarchal orders were vital for future agriculture because they were backed by capital, a statement clearly at odds with the 'aristocratic poverty' findings of the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. If farming was to return profits, it had to '...induce men of capital, and if possible, men also of education and social position, to put part of the money on the land, whether as owners or occupiers, or better still, as both'.⁶⁶ Evidently Green is less convinced by these expressions of pro-landlord propaganda. The Condition of Rural England texts were generally supportive of reformist measures. Land redistribution, if not actual nationalisation, appeared the most obvious solution for continued failure, yet the persistence of large-scale landownership presented a sizeable obstacle to change. In championing the small landholder, Green was clearly antagonized by the appeal from large farmers and landowners for all classes to consolidate for the greater benefit of farming. His argument affirmed four centuries of patrician sponsored enclosures created distinct class divisions, yet those who gained by such methods, now under apparent financial threat, conveniently wished to erase this history before being undermined by the inefficiency of the very system they had created. Conversely, what this attempt at unity illustrated was how little close association existed between agrarian classes. Implicit in this observation was a proposition that though an appeal to national security could develop some spurious unity within the industry, it also, unwittingly, let the elite order off the hook as the fundamental issue of land reform was circumvented. By attaching blame to 'unreasonable' demands for wage rises, valuable attention was deflected from the failure of aristocratic responsibility.⁶⁷

Within Green's democratic re-scripting of farm failure, favourable public opinion was a precious commodity. Unhelpful biases therefore had to be effaced. Conflicting interests needed exposure before their eventual resolution as disharmony was implicated as an agent of depression. The argument here is that figures such as Green wanted unity within the agricultural industry, but not on landlordist terms. Large tenant or owner occupier farmers, agriculturalists working 100 acres or more, symbolised conservative attitudes and an obstinacy that retarded a redistribution of land to encourage greater intensive production. 'It is not that the large farmer has any greater measure of human wickedness than any other class of the community' contended Green, rather it was his narrow-minded, 'looking through a pea-shooter' philosophy encouraging unremitted individual accumulation over the greater good of farming that proved unacceptable. Thus '...when he is asked to give up a field or two of his farm, he feels that he is asked to give up some of his income for the purpose,

forsooth, of making some of his labourers more independent, eventuating probably with the loss of some of his best workers'.⁶⁸ Green could reference literary support for similar censure. For instance Tallerman, writing on behalf of The Commercial and Agricultural Co-operative Society stated that British farmers were the most 'narrow-minded, bigoted, prejudiced and stubborn class'.⁶⁹ For the wider benefit of agriculture, and here patriotic responsibility is implied, a degree of self-sacrifice had to be conceded. Quite simply, for F.E. Green, too many *large* farmers would constitute a national disaster by their unwillingness to progress and reform.⁷⁰

A close reading of the Condition of Rural England literature thus reveals an anti-landowning stance, which though avoiding a land nationalisation cry outright, nevertheless declaims the persistence of large-scale individual interest. By advocating the co-existence of what were two mutually exclusive systems, peasant proprietorship and landlordism, the movement once again demonstrated through seeking compromise how a Ruralist agenda sought to extricate agriculture from opposing dogmatic positions through a confluence of orthodox Left and Right ideas. Even Haggard's rural work can not be read as the text of an aristocratic apologist despite his supposed landlordist tendencies.⁷¹ Instead, he firmly advocated a revised form of landlordism that offered more enlightened methods such as the provision of substantial acres of land for labourers to recreate some semblance of the former peasant existence.⁷² An inability to compartmentalise Haggard's work as either pro-landowning or anti-landlordist reflected the subtle nuances of the Ruralist movement. His compromise vision aimed to secure the moral high ground without resorting to revolutionary solutions advocated by Socialist land reform movements. Ostensibly, his argument becomes a solicitation for pragmatic, progressive, informed and above all, responsible landlordism.⁷³ His appeal for the revival of the yeoman class was not based upon nationalisation or punitive land reform. Indeed Haggard's interpretation of 'yeomen' lends itself to a notion of a more empowered tenant farmer, with greater opportunities for the diminishing labour force to rise to the level of tenant farmer.

*I am sure one of the worst fates which can befall England is that her land should become either a play-thing or a waste, and that her greatest safeguard lies in the re-creation of a yeoman class, rooted in the soil and supported by the soil.*⁷⁴

Though the popular conception of a waning aristocratic order was verified by their continued adherence to the principles of self-interest despite the expediency of co-operation in the contemporary economic climate, the Condition of Rural England authors were not seduced by the image of the bankrupt patriarch.⁷⁵ As a symbol of national decay, Green's elevation of the peasant evoked an equal sense of loss.

Unfortunately, the Condition of Rural England debate brings the student no closer to unravelling the web of patriarchal myth, and thus no firm statements can be

arrived at when assessing farm failure as a landlordist narrative other than asserting that landowning values were particularly active within the creation of a popular notion of depression. Overwhelmingly, the received impression of the era was that landowners and large or tenant farmers still clung to far too many old ideas. In poetic appreciation these were a source of beauty and serenity to many, in economic terms out-moded rustic philosophy represented the origin of ruin. Popular debate prior to the Condition of Rural England literature, as typified by the second Royal Commission on agricultural depression, aimed to establish who incurred greater suffering, an argument usually won by landowners for the obvious reason they possessed the ability to investigate, articulate and control debate. What Ruralist writers like Green suggested, and this paved the way for later small holding claims, was that continued obsession with landlordist problems symbolised the rootedness of farming to the past. If English agriculture was to compete in the world market, it had to eradicate the local fiefdoms that belonged to an earlier age.

5.3.2 Sporting Lands

With farming in parlous decay, that most conspicuous example of capitalist consumption and a popular route out of distress for 'impoverished' landowners, namely game land, proved an affront to Victorian agricultural sensibilities.⁷⁶ Conversion of productive soil into sporting land symbolised the diminished profitability of farming as the traditional paternal guardians of agriculture, responsible for providing direction and capital, appeared to no longer exercise concern for agricultural interests. At a time of desperate rural poverty, frivolities such as game land bore the socially loaded implication that pheasants possessed greater value than tenants and labourers.⁷⁷ The transformation signified an initiatory attempt to set-aside rural land use for the purposes of leisure. A new environmental ethic was fabricated as a result whereby work became subordinate to play. However, a more objective and less emotive reading of sporting pursuits could contend game land was a valid response to depression, as landowners solicited profits from land that could equally have degenerated into tumbledown.

Yet the source for much of this sporting vogue lay not in the old rural order, but in the rise of an urban-based *nouveaux riche* who shared little taste for landed paternalism and moral guardianship within parochial organic communities, preferring residence in idealised states of seclusion and leisure. Metaphorically, game land symbolised the deepening loss of rural autonomy, with agrarian destinies dependent firmly upon urban capital or the whims of individuals disinterested in preserving a rural working order. 'Very gradually, the aristocracy are relieving themselves of their unprofitable English lands,' wrote J.W. Martin and their places are being filled by a sporting plutocracy, who are cordially hated by the populations they take over'.⁷⁸

Indeed, game land added a further layer of social control that diminished the democracy of rural land, a process initiated by the enclosure movement. Surprisingly, for those who pigeon-holed Haggard as a die-hard figure of the establishment, some of the harshest criticism of sporting land originated within *Rural England*. In his conclusion, Haggard was moved to write 'the land of a country does not solely exist for the pleasure of the rich and the advantage of their salaried dependants; therefore this is an evil system which in my view must tend to promote the ferocious mendicancy...that is one of the features of the age'. Game land split the rural interest.⁷⁹ This encroachment of leisure interests upon the rural landscape was evidently more insidious than suburban growth, being less visibly destructive than bricks and mortar.⁸⁰

Irresponsible landlordism, both from the *ancien regime* and the new order was implicated as a major contributor to failure. Accompanying such denouncements was a coded entreaty to allow those whose livelihood depended directly on the soil, opportunities to undertake small-scale, peasant-style farming practices. In the climate of co-operation and compromise that the Condition of Rural England writers hoped to instil, large-scale landlordist management could exist next to peasant farming in symbiosis. Underlying these aims was an assumption that if agricultural land could not be managed appropriately and ultimately for the patriotic benefit of the nation, then a need existed for the democratization of rural space through a reclamation of land for the dispossessed peasantry. The occupation of the land emerged as the critical component in the construction of English rural space, and this philosophy was sustained throughout subsequent land reform programmes.

5.3.3 Cottage Accommodation

The stance against landlordism exhibited in Green's *The Awakening of England* conceptualised depression as a betrayal of responsibilities, underpinning his conviction that a new land holding system offered the more appropriate remedy for depression. The issue of responsibility was also pertinent in regard to cottage housing, the traditional accommodation of the workers. A Board of Agriculture report on impoverished rural housing concluded the material condition of rural building stock corresponded with rural depopulation. Haggard supported the case, declaring '...bad cottages were a great reason for the rural exodus. Young labouring men would often settle down in their native villages if they could find decent houses to which to take a wife, but failing this, they went into towns and married there'.⁸¹ Bad housing symbolised patriarchal disinvestment despite housing provision representing a basic human necessity. J.W. Martin noted in the village of Stebbing in Essex, 52 cottages were empty, many in a dilapidated state, because of landlord neglect. The village population, tellingly, had dropped from 1300 to 500.⁸² The depression also rendered



Plate 3: Decrepit Cottage Accommodation

cottage accommodation a profligate expense as budgets required rationalisation. The problem was exacerbated by the inability of the Housing of the Working Class Act (1890) to ensure, or rather effectively define, an acceptable, uniform standard for housing.⁸³ Defective accommodation propagated the incidence of disease and other physical afflictions that ultimately impinged upon the labourer's capacity to work effectively. It also inculcated a desire to physically relocate beyond desperate poverty. Despite out-migration, a housing shortfall forced young couples to move from villages to towns.⁸⁴ The reasons for the deficit resided in the demolition of old houses without the construction of replacement accommodation. Recognising the distinction between 'tumbledown' cottages of Picturesque myth and a 'falling-down' cottage, the housing problem was, for Green at least, more pressing than rural resettlement.⁸⁵ Bad housing provided instant and less disputable symbols of disinvestment and neglect. Farm failure could conveniently be blamed on extraneous factors such as foreign competition and bad weather; the *responsibility* for the decay of housing stock was directly accountable.

As each account of depression within the Ruralist *genre* was principally humanitarian in style rather than ideologically driven, social injustices were located less in wider class wars and more within a specific discourse of rural failure. This approach accepted the proposition that the rural milieu still operated its own set of social and economic parameters, even within the emergent industrial capitalist age. Aristocratic decadence in a rural context assumed added meaning because game land conversion continued to deny access to land, a direct infringement upon the livelihood of thousands of rural dwellers. With little scope for labour beyond agriculture in most rural districts, workers when confronted with landlordist indifference had no option but to seek employment beyond traditional parochial confines. Yet it was this relative emancipation of the labourer, in the sense that he or she now possessed the ability to leave, that many pro-landlord apologists attributed as a causal factor of depression. The connection between such episodically local events and the nation as a whole lay in a simple belief in the centrality of agriculture to national fortunes.

5.3.4 Closed Villages: Closed Minds

A similar reappraisal of *patria* and responsibility within Ruralist literature underpinned investigations into the psychology of depression. The impairment of agricultural decision-making processes by prolonged depression was considered in the previous chapter. Within the Condition of Rural England debate, the recounting of local evidence with a literary collection and extrapolation into a national context provided a foundation from which functionalist farming responses not only embraced wider national anxieties, evidently through a sense of pessimism, but also fuelled them. Haggard, notably was criticized for the overt melancholia of his textual endeavour to

reflect the dominant farming spirit.⁸⁶ Indeed, Haggard's avowal that farmers railed against 'the mills of God' provoked even less restrained animadversion for its indisputable melodramaticism. Underlying this censure was a coded criticism of farmers should they succumb to such negative thinking. 'We do not think that many farmers believe themselves to be "fighting against the mills of God"' wrote an anonymous reviewer. 'If they do believe it, the sooner they shake themselves out of it the better'. Significantly, the real fear was that Haggard's powerful and influential rhetoric could be absorbed by the farming community, undermining industrial morale. If Haggard had overstated expressions of self-pity and disillusionment, industry insecurity could easily convert these 'grumbles' into genuine problems.⁸⁷ Thus a fear farming would never return to former prosperity could, in effect, become a serious obstacle towards achieving profitability.⁸⁸ Such responses reveal the Condition of Rural England literature not only shaped opinions on the state of farming held beyond the agricultural community, but also impinged directly upon the industry's own self-perception.

5.3.5 Bankruptcy of Ideas

A product of this psychological depression was an overwhelming apathy amongst farmers. Doomed psychologies were visible within an incapacity to formulate innovative solutions for depression, cultivating an unhealthy dependency on Governmental resolutions, which eventually proved to be unforthcoming. Spencer Walpole was particularly critical of farming responses, especially in comparison with the 'active ingenuity of the American [farmers]'. Walpole accused farmers of lacking 'inventive resources which have given the British race supremacy in other industries'.⁸⁹ Apathy for some ruralist writers, such as William Cooper, illustrated the pervasiveness of the *fin de siècle* inclination, fearing the old proto-capitalist order had been rejected for something altogether uncertain as well as reflecting a malaise permeating from successive governments downwards.⁹⁰

*It must be manifest to all keen observers that unless the people and the legislature are soon aroused from their Rip Van Winkle sleep to a full realisation of the insidious manner in which these enemies [apathy, ignorance] of our race have entrenched themselves round about us hemming us in on every side, the direst perils and disasters must await us.*⁹¹

A contradiction emerges as farmers and farm labourers were simultaneously celebrated for their skill, industry and energy in romanticised myth despite displaying such abject pessimism. The reality, for Ruralist observers was that rationally induced or plain untenable despondency constituted a particular impediment to successful farming.

This negativity revealed the innate conservatism of farmers at parish level. Haggard's farm steward typified the sentiment by divulging a localism so intense it consciously rejected new ideas not formulated within the locale. 'I don't want to know what folk are doing in other places. I want to know what they are doing here'.⁹² Knowledge becomes highly spatialised, a process further compounded by suspicion and distrust of intermediaries between national ignorance and local problems such as Rider Haggard, who attempted to overcome this spatial resistance to ideas by writing on 'real' agrarian issues. One highly illustrative expression of a constrained outlook was the belief in an individual farm typifying *all* agricultural holdings.⁹³ Haggard, once again, uncovers this locale-centric view through correspondence with an irate farmer unconvinced by claims of widespread distress because there was no evidence of depression on his holding. Haggard quite correctly asserts, 'to that man, the affairs of his little farm were the husbandry of England'. Though, this "farm as England" syndrome proved an obstacle to informed judgements, it more interestingly revealed the absence of any information structure that facilitated the filtering down of national-scale conceptions of depression to parish level. Principally, the work of the Board of Agriculture set up in 1889 by Lord Salisbury was to disseminate information for the farming community, yet this organisation was largely dominated by members of the landed establishment such as Henry Chaplin and Walter Long, people R.C.K. Ensor termed 'squires acceptable to the unimaginative majority of their order'.⁹⁴ The Central Chamber of Agriculture with its network of local assemblies was similarly dominated by the land owning influence.⁹⁵ One such example of the transfer of knowledge was a Central Chamber dictate inviting all local chambers to report on the condition of agriculture in individual districts based upon a set criteria that included suggesting causes of depression; listing subjects of complaint; describing the effects on each class and asserting potential remedies.⁹⁶

What Haggard's nescient farm steward exposed was a real need for popular investigative work into depression at the time. Thus the importance of the *Condition of Rural England* texts as an educating tool for urban classes is equalled by their usefulness to farmers as informative digests. Not only was the geography of depression plainly ill-conceived or ignored by statesmen and less functional observers, but was also little understood by the agricultural population. J.W. Martin illustrates that even those closely interested in rural affairs reproduced accounts that failed to recognise a geographical component to the nature and occurrence of depression, incorrectly fusing local and national experiences as universal circumstances. Though offering a realist account of distress, he extrapolates the experience of one heavily deprived village in Essex (Stebbing) as typical of English farming generally, discounting any sense of regional difference.⁹⁷ A recurring theme throughout the *Condition of Rural England* literature was an assertion that agricultural depression was

equally an expression of ignorance as a manifestation of economic failure. The 'farm as England' theory lends weight to this claim while propounding a greater awareness of conditions beyond an individual milieu offered the farmer fresh ideas for a resolution. Therefore the dissemination of agricultural knowledge becomes an explicitly patriotic act, action which even some Ruralist writers, as illustrated, did not practice.

5.3.6 Inappropriate Rural Knowledge: The Imposition of Elementary Schooling

The pursuit of knowledge is intimately bound up within the issue of rural education. Although anxiety was expressed that farmers acted with a paucity of information, as demonstrated with the defective practices employed in laying arable land down to pasture, the popular issue focused instead upon the education of children. The consuming interest lay in an absence of a specific rural education which left children able to read and write, but unskilled in traditional rustic crafts. Increasingly, rural children failed to grasp the meaning of their country existence through a curriculum popularly perceived to inculcate urban values and encourage out-migration when an appropriate age had been attained. Farmers bemoaned the shortage of industrious labour and blamed inappropriate education for averting children's minds from the land.⁹⁸ Suspicion was not singularly extant from within the farming community with regard to the new education system. The Rev. Octavius Cambridge, rector of Bloxworth in Dorset was convinced that keeping boys in school until the age of thirteen discouraged them from pursuing a life on the land.⁹⁹ Not unsurprisingly for farmers unable to find an efficient workforce, as one Herefordshire farmer whose land had reverted to tumbledown as a result expressed, the only viable solution appeared to be the abolition of education entirely. Continual advertising for labour had made the unnamed Herefordshire farmer realise '...educated people...would not labour on the land'.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, many farmers subscribed to a denial of basic learning simply to maintain an ignorant, but loyal labourforce. A farmer from Pershore typified the belief, stating 'over-education was one of the causes, [of labour problems] as the fact remained that the best worker was the man who could neither read nor write', an opinion Haggard could only describe as 'primitive'.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, Haggard was convinced that in tandem with the diffusion of newspapers, the new education system had combined with the 'restless spirit of the age' to encourage the rural labourer to seek better paid and less physically demanding labour elsewhere, thus undermining the long term future of the farming industry.¹⁰² J.L. Cowlard remained less convinced of the positive role the village school could offer, grudgingly accepting that education was a needful sacrifice for farmers. Agriculturalists were forced to recognise that education was a moral necessity of greater importance than the preservation of a skilled workforce. 'It is true that for the time education presses heavily on the land...'

Cowlard wrote at the start of the depression in 1879, '...but it is a duty which the country is bound to perform, and the result of years will probably show a substantial diminution of crime, and an advancement in the moral progress of the people'.¹⁰³ Thus the elementary school was portrayed as an enemy within the rural midst, imposing suspect ideas from beyond parochial boundaries. Once again knowledge appears heavily spatialised, invoking a distrust of ideas received from extraneous sources, in this case urban origins as the school emerged as a symbolic disputant of traditional local lore.

Yet the school system offered an opportunity to engender within the labouring child an awareness of their patriotic responsibility devoid from the usual 'unintelligible pedantry', cultivating a love of the land which would in consequence develop a loyalty to the state.¹⁰⁴ F.E. Green, most notably among the Condition of Rural England writers was firmly in favour of less didactic instruction preferring the resurrection of old inherited rural crafts which could simultaneously revive country life and raise standards of physique by moving beyond the classroom desk. Practical methods could encourage an allegiance to both the soil and the state. A sympathetic formula for providing rural education ultimately offered solutions to the problem of depression by directly addressing rural needs, so for example, by offering a technological grounding, the future 'sons and daughters of the soil' would be less inclined to flee the country because an understanding of farming had been instilled within them, a view supported from France by distinguished educationalist Felix Pécault who promoted the idea of rural education providing instruction in the 'life of the fields'.¹⁰⁵

The education problem was manufactured out of farming neuroses. The sense of paranoia in a denial of any responsibility for failure is evident in disapprobation towards education, primarily as a contrivance to undermine agriculture by failing to serve industry needs, and secondly as a disruptive influence upon the resonance of everyday rural life. Objectionable approaches to the new universal school system not only reflected the entrenched and innately conservative attitudes of farmers, landowners and village dignitaries but also demonstrated their unwillingness to accept increased emancipation of rural labouring classes by a denial of basic elementary education. Henry Liversidge, a landlord apologist, visualised education as an unwelcome route to social unrest, undoubtedly a most unwelcome presence in country areas so soon after the tumult created by Joseph Arch's National Agricultural Labourers Union. For Liversidge, once the labouring classes possessed some element of a universal standard of education then they would hold the wit to 'recognise the hardness of their lives, and appreciate the possible value of their power'.¹⁰⁶

In common with other readings of failure, the education issue was less directly concerned with the technicalities of farming, transcribing social questions not solely connected to agriculture into a rural context. What the Condition of Rural England

writers uncover are all the neurotic tendencies that possessed farmers. Yet displays of obvious conservatism from within the farming lobby were played down and are only detectable through a conscious search for them. Farming is alternatively portrayed as the unlucky recipient of a contrived *deus ex machina* impediment that rails against the previous good fortune of the farmer while attention is deflected from authentic issues, namely ignorance of new techniques and practices, essential for competitiveness and secondly, an awareness from within the industry of a geography of failure that may have provided insights into the best environmental conditions and management practices for salvation. The texts reveal a persuasive doctrine that education was less a useful tool to facilitate an end to depression and more an example of external meddling from people with no conception of 'real' country life.

Each leitmotif was based upon well-known symbols held within the Victorian countryside, both real and imagined. Within the rural realist Condition of Rural England literature, it did not follow, however, that such icons were interpreted along the lines of their more commonly held meaning. For example, representations of the labourer cottage as derelict, unhealthy and tantamount to neglected capital investment ran counter to the more popularly held urban-based vision of the romantic tumbledown cottage. The cottage in particular was a highly contested and contradictory symbol. As the most quintessentially English example of domestic vernacular architecture, its very preservation was critical to both reactionary and radical celebrations of a rural English homeland. Recognition for the importance of rural affairs in English life was a motivating force behind the Ruralist movement and therefore significance was attached to established rustic icons such as the cottage. Contradictorily, the movement advocated better labour accommodation but this inevitably led to the pulling down of the tumble-down cottage to be replaced by bricks and mortar, imposing thoroughly modern and progressive designs. It is this conundrum that confuses the ultimate conclusions of figures such as F.E. Green, who advocated radical overhauls of proprietorial systems and social orders while attempting to maintain many of the old rural values. However, these values do not necessarily fit in Green's re-envisionment, because too often they were products of landlordist capital and interference in rural life.

Three commonalities link each of these leitmotifs: they all questioned degrees of rural autonomy; all exculpate the farming industry from instigating its own downfall and lastly, each is ultimately concerned with raising social implications of depression rather than highlighting the need for change in agrarian production methods. The cottage was not the only powerful symbol employed within the six leitmotifs of failure. Both game land and the new elementary schools simultaneously symbolised the imposition of new ideas, extraneous to parochial interests and the consequent

reaction within specific locales against change. By directing culpability at outside interests, ineffectual farming practices were glossed over. Perhaps continual blame for schools over low wages and unappealing work as the chief causal factor behind the labour exodus can be read as indicative of the lack of communication between agrarian classes. Finally, overwhelmingly research undertaken on various agricultural tours by Ruralist authors was focused upon the social ramifications of prolonged depression. Rather than concentrating on the implications of low prices for farm economies, attention is given to the breakdown of rural communities and the idea of the village as a living organism. The imposition of schools is not even immediately connected with agricultural depression until a tenuous link is made between declining human resources and higher rates of pay at a time when farmers could afford wage increases least. By concentrating on social concerns, original parochial issues could be converted into the broader social debates that raged within various media, political circles and the intelligentsia. This in effect was how the biggest concern of the rural writers, the loss of an English racial archetype, which shall be examined later, emerged from what were intended to be 'realistic' accounts of the suffering of the rural population.

By drawing upon examples of failure from across (albeit southern) England, the sense of spatiality and regionalised failure is diminished. Establishing conclusions from pulling together similarities between sometimes quite disparate areas deadens locational specificity that ignores local, individual issues, which in the absence of a broad consensus on what the depression actually meant was how the farmer conceived failure. The notions of doomed psychologies and a bankruptcy ideas are concepts obtained from touring rural England and making general overviews. It is questionable, though, if farmers would have perceived their own psychological state in such terms. Thus a 'truthful' representation of rural issues is gradually subordinated to author interpretations and prejudices. However, though real cases of failure may have been standardised to fit literary arguments, the Condition of Rural England campaign did contribute to a regionalisation of agricultural depression within the imaginary, culturally-consumed realm.

5.4 The Territorialization of Depression and the Southern Myth

5.4.1 The Location of Failure in Imaginary Space

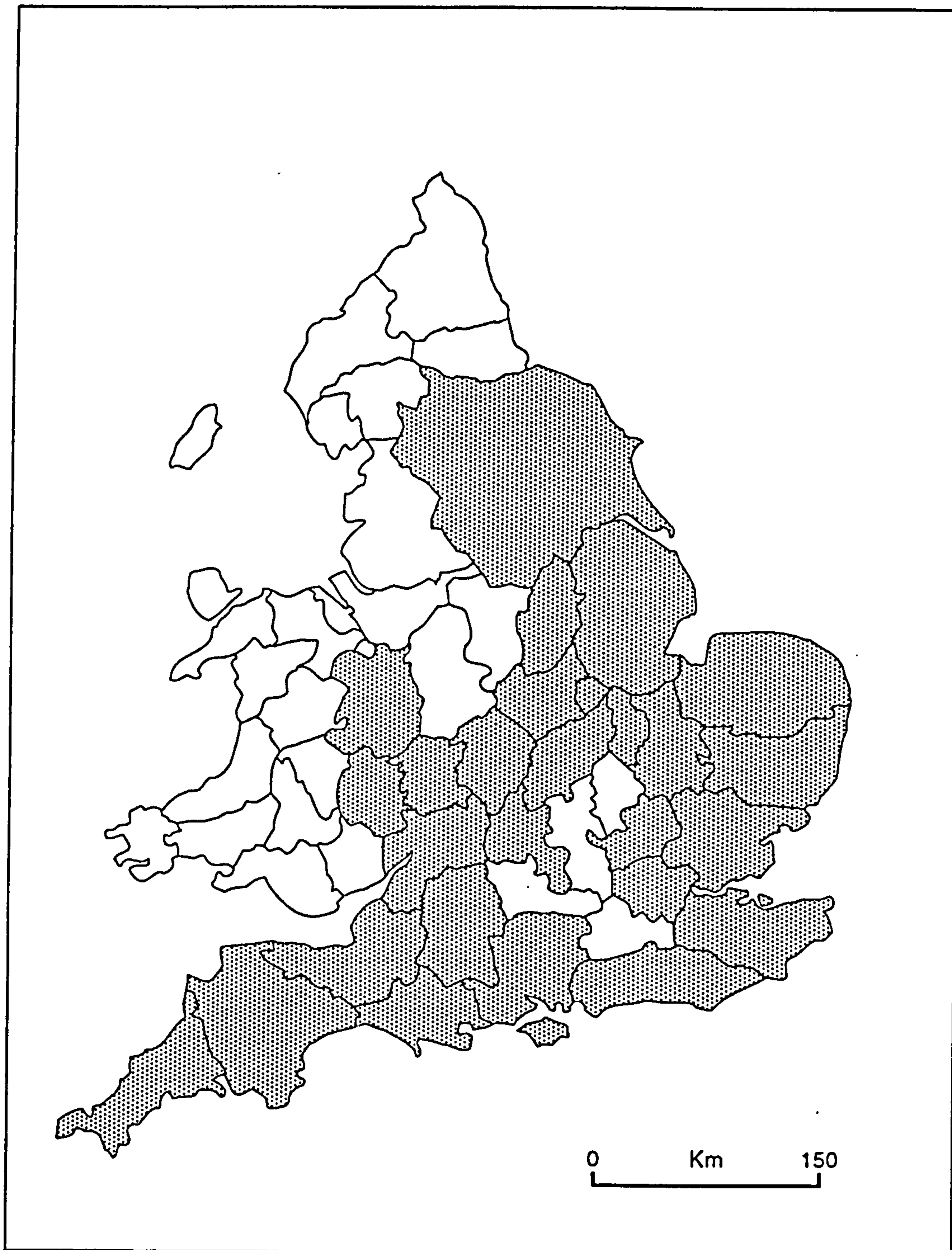
As discussed in the previous section, it is difficult for the historical geographer to determine a geography of late nineteenth-century agricultural depression, as no contemporary accepted outline in physical or imaginary terms was readily available. There are a number of possible reasons for this such as incomplete flows of economic information, landlordist biases and the intense localism of farming life. However, two issues exist which these explanations fail to resolve. Firstly, the depth of depression

was distorted because of its prevalence in the south and east of England, suggesting wider cultural evaluations on the symbolic eminence of arable over pasture may have been enacted. Secondly, economic evidence conceded southern England experienced greater degrees of distress, but because the 'south country' landscape of the home counties was established as a cherished expression of Englishness, depression was exaggerated spatially within the *fin de siècle* fatalism of the age to suggest the problem was national in extent.

Though the Condition of Rural England movement was capable of romanticisation, the most significant idealisation, ironically, was bound up within the definition of a geography of depression. By an irregular fabrication of what actually constituted England, the Condition of Rural England writers through omitting to study northern English counties also contributed to a cultural rather than economic assumption that the agrarian depression was a largely southern English phenomenon.¹⁰⁷ Significantly, Haggard in *Rural England* looked at no counties north of the Trent with the exception of Yorkshire. Interestingly as a geography of depression occurrence had not been successfully established by the publication date of *Rural England*, significance should be drawn from the similarities between the map of the counties visited by Haggard (Figure 6) and locations recorded by historians such as T.W. Fletcher and P.J. Perry of the worst areas of depression, highlighting southern and eastern England.¹⁰⁸ The logical conclusion for this parallel lies in a realisation by Haggard, perhaps based on the inconclusive work of two Royal Commissions and anecdotal evidence, that the north and west did not suffer like southern England, thereby making less captivating reading. This converging of public interest and failure is not in dispute. Rather what is interesting is the degree by which the recognition of a spatial component to depression is buried beneath broad generalisations, typically by stating 'agricultural interests of *England* are in no flourishing condition' or that by highlighting *national* dangers such as a threat to security, as exemplified by the Boer War and racial degeneracy, regionalised financial failure is forgotten or dispensed with.¹⁰⁹ F.E. Green similarly failed to venture further north than the small holding schemes in south Lincolnshire. By re-treading the same ground Haggard had covered ten years earlier, Green re-created a familiarity that could be misinterpreted as indicative of especially bad failure.

There is a duplicity in this regionally biased representation which, when uncovered, reveals the influence of a series of other political and cultural resonances beyond discernible economic dereliction, most notably a patriotic reassertion of Englishness; the desire to recognise a national heartland in real space, and finally, a conflict between industrial modernity and an idealised rural past.¹¹⁰ As John Rennie Short asserts, the ideological importance of the countryside to the nation eclipsed agricultural issues, yet the depression, by equally threatening to destabilise precious

Figure 6: English Counties Visited by Rider Haggard for his book *Rural England* (1902)



landscape aesthetics brought farming and Victorian Pastoral ideology closer together in the public mind.¹¹¹ In a sense, the depression could only be conceptualised in terms of its threat to the idealised state of rural England. A comprehension of the imposition of nationally prescribed readings of farm failure on locally conceived representations of depression is vital.

At issue is a spatial distortion at national-level of the popular 'received' signifiers of depression extracted from countless local geographies, on which the Condition of Rural England texts offer some insight. In short, when an interpretation of depression was transferred from individual conception, which invariably conformed to a reflection of personal loss, into an image modelled by society, it sustained a series of cultural transformations that absorbed dominant vocalities.¹¹² These vocalities probably included a landlordist narrative of failure through to a shift in a social, cultural and economic orientation towards the south. The growing interest in southern England revoked the former northern economic dominance and secondly reflected a cultural reaction against uncompromising industrial progress. This led to a celebration of southern icons, of which arable agriculture represented one such symbol. Critical to this shift was the emergence of an urban bourgeois culture based upon rustic revivalism that incorporated and manipulated old rural values.¹¹³ As Peter Taylor, affirms, the north was rejected as a potential spiritual homeland in favour of the south-east, due in part to its distance from the centre of late nineteenth-century cultural and artistic life.¹¹⁴ Christiana Payne supports such an assertion identifying the popularity of southern arable landscapes in connection with a proximity to London where most of the popular artists of the day resided. Trips into the home counties around London were convenient.¹¹⁵

The subtext to this debate was the evolution of a south country myth and how this disfigured a 'true' representation of agricultural depression. Roland Barthes states landscapes (such as the southern arable scene) become 'appropriated by society', a process by which they mature into signifiers for a series of cultural constructions and are thus emptied of their 'reality' content to be replaced by somewhat hazy collective imaginings.¹¹⁶ Though such a philosophical approach was not actually theorised in the Condition of Rural England texts, the whole purpose of re-writing a rural 'reality' was to avoid this mythologizing process. However, such aims were untenable because of author bias, so that texts conspired to add extra layering to the myths they attempted to discredit. Intentionally or otherwise, too often the effects of depression were exaggerated through their unrepresentativeness as extreme cases then mythologised to reflect the idyllic landscape they were alleged to threaten. In this case, a southern spatiality is added to the imagined late-Victorian geography of depression. The threat from tumbledown to a 'south country' landscape can be best understood as an indicative of degeneracy fears. The intended aim of the Condition of Rural England

movement was to portray tumbledown as the result of an individual farmers financial adversity, yet in popular myth a few abandoned fields in this most cherished landscape were tantamount to potential national crisis.

If agricultural depression can be conceptualised, beyond the farming milieu as a mediation, in part, of national despondency, then it is intimately bound up within the same processes that enabled the evolution of a 'south country' myth, namely a desire to reconstitute a definitive abstraction of Englishness. Depression signified an unwelcome component within the search for a notional patriotic homeland which was a *representative* space of the nation as a whole. As late-Victorian English society had divided quite conclusively into urban and rural groups, the only true 'representative' space remained in a shared past that was overwhelmingly defined by the idealistic parameters of national harmony and social stability.¹¹⁷ Through nostalgia, national identity could become rooted and thereby more tangible and focused. The 'south country' vision behind an anti-modernist stance assumed an expression of "deep England", a formerly placeless idyllic kernel of England and Englishness, constructed both from remembrance and recollection, crucially adopting agriculture as an intrinsic and vital constituent.¹¹⁸ The 'south country' remained outside actual lived experiences but was recurrent within popular imaginations, or as Samuel and Thompson would suggest, inhabiting a 'symbolic rather than territorial space'.¹¹⁹ Thus a southern inclination in deciphering the essence of Englishness is both conscious and unconsciously realised. Martin Wiener asserts that the 'pull of the past' was a central concomitant of the southern metaphor.¹²⁰ The 'south country', as Howkins suggests, was an idealised mantle overlying what approximated to the south-east of England, originating from within the urban realm during the final two decades of the nineteenth-century. The farmers of southern and eastern England were inevitably enveloped within this theorization as signifiers of national bucolic idealism.¹²¹ Significantly, this dating of the emergence of southern icons problematizes claims that the 'Merrie England' rural myth, of which the 'south country' was intrinsically linked, was purely fashioned in response to urban malaise. The theorized loss of a cherished landscape by depression similarly infiltrated the popular idyllic envisionment of the rural to suggest depression attacked the 'south country' ideal rather than the economic and political entities that constituted the southern counties of England. This in turn, through an assault on the theoretical 'representative space' implied depression was a *national* problem, when in *economic* terms, it was undoubtedly a more serious trend in the southern England.¹²² The nature of the process is evident in the establishment of a Conference on Agriculture held in 1892 where agricultural experts discussed possible solutions to depression following low prices and a bad harvest in the *south* of England.¹²³ Furthermore, and this point is critical, authors such as Rider Haggard and F.E. Green, fortified the sense of southern England as representative of all-England

by locating their investigations within the region yet prescribed their findings as indicative of Britain as a whole, thus confusing any accurate areal ascription of failure. The geography of failure becomes less a plotting of bankruptcy and more a meditation on a national anxiety for the destruction of rural values at a time when England was engrossed in the act of revering them. By subconsciously adopting a number of the southern spatial biases in the location of their investigation and the obvious identification of a readership that was metropolitan in outlook, the Condition of Rural England writers merely reinforced them further, thus deepening the mythology of depression.

5.4.2 The Celebration of Arable England and an Aesthetic of Utility

The role of agriculture in shaping *the* quintessential English landscape was recognised in both Condition of Rural England and broader state of the nation accounts. Arable cultivation in particular promoted a 'civilising' function that had not allegedly embraced northern England. Thus R.C.K. Ensor could write

*North of the Trent, civilization is altogether younger. The wilder features of the landscape are among England's glories, but the 'Englishness' and most of the merit of its human aspects is a late echo of a southern influence.*¹²⁴

The ideal English landscape was soothing, gentle and above all, well manicured. Arable land over and above pasture symbolised attention to detail and intensive investment of labour. The irony of this stance is revealed in the subsequent failure of land converted to pasture, where farmers were to realise too often at their cost that pasture grassland required equal levels of exertion and not a simple sowing of natural grasses which were then left for cattle to graze on. Any reversion to tumbledown challenged southern English landscape metaphors by creating a distinctly 'un-English' vista. It was within the interplay of 'southern' metaphor and a wider sense of decay that farm failure impacted. As demonstrated previously, economic evidence offered substance to claims that rent reductions, bankruptcies and labour outmigration were more prevalent in the south. Furthermore, arable farming, the predominant method of the south, sustained a harsher and more prolonged financial downturn than the north. Popular depictions of the depression were 'southern' in essence, but the questions remained as to what degree this was based upon economic evidence or an appropriation of the south as the sacred heart of England. Technical farming literature had recognised a geography of failure. Prothero noted Essex, Huntingdonshire and Northamptonshire were particularly affected by a reduction in rent levels, usually over 25%.¹²⁵ Condition of Rural England writers would have similarly uncovered such evidence, though it is probable their investigative remarks were shaped by earlier functionalist work such as the Royal Commissions examining agricultural depression.

However, the diversity of opinions expressed within the texts and the rejection of any dominant left or right wing ideology, allowed the Condition of Rural England *genre* to be influenced or even manipulated by wider social and cultural anxieties, which may or may not have been the intentions of the authors.

Perhaps the most lucid example of how the Condition of Rural England literature conflated rural idealisation and functional reality was demonstrated in the inscription of a new aesthetic onto the English farmscape. The 'utility aesthetic' represented a radical shift from the poetic romanticism of the Victorian Picturesque envisionment. As Patrick Wright attests, the Picturesque was placed not only at the antithesis of productive ideals such as exertion and effort, but was also totally dissociated from utility and an exploitation of the soil.¹²⁶ Based upon a notion of beauty through productivity, the new abstract principles of toil and plenty recognised a human element, by promoting the English rural landscape as an (agri)cultural formation and less a natural phenomenon.¹²⁷ It was no coincidence that this re-evaluation occurred at a time when art embraced the notion of what Stephen Kern terms 'positive negative space', a process in which the background or 'negative space' traditionally represented as a passive agricultural landscape was elevated to an identical, functional importance with the positive element or subject.¹²⁸ Critically, the notion of utility accepted a social responsibility by claiming the Picturesque ideal did not alone keep people on the soil.¹²⁹ The 'utility' landscape, therefore, was a working landscape and one which appealed to subscribers of the Condition of Rural England ethos, conveying as it did, an invigorating scene resplendent in purposeful, and thereby ultimately rewarding, activity. Notions of the unnaturalness of inactivity also proved popular, as Malcolm Chase reveals, with earlier radical movements, such as the Chartist Land Plans.¹³⁰ Robert Dayus, a Shropshire tenant farmer, described uncultivated, tumbledown land as a 'deplorable fact'.¹³¹

Arable cultivation most naturally evoked an impression of productivity, primarily because it was labour intensive with a highly visible materialisation of the effort invested. Therefore, the utility aesthetic instantly aligned itself with the southern farmscape, despite the presence of arable farming in Yorkshire, sporadically extending north to eastern Scotland. Productivity principles were swiftly elevated to an idealised state, based upon a nostalgic remembrance of the 'Golden Age' of High Farming, the popular appraisal of a period of high profits during the mid-nineteenth-century. The contrast with the English rural landscape of depression is absolute and schismatic, evident through an unbalanced comparison between the harsh realities of contemporary perceptions and a roseate vision of the past.

Within the texts that interest us here, the aesthetic is less explicitly stated, but more implicitly alluded to by a reaction against two manifestations of depression: tumbledown and a conspicuous deterioration in the standards of land maintenance,

best typified by unkempt hedgerows and unemptied ditches. Green's description of a field at Inkpen Beacon, a formerly productive area of Hampshire, evoked a typical scene of decay, from deep within a characteristic 'south country' location. The imagery is heavily imbued with a sense that nature is once again ascendant.

*As you walk across a field where the withered unharvested grasses and the tall seed-bearing wild parsley and thistles are shoulder high, rabbits scurry away at almost every step you take, while pheasants and partridges fill the air with the whirr of wings.*¹³²

For William Cooper, the achievement of maximum productivity from the soil was a deeply patriotic act, a view shared by all the ruralist writers referred to in this chapter. 'If a country allows its land to remain untilled, and a vast extent of splendid arable land to run to grass, grazing lands and heath,' Cooper theorized, 'it fails to turn potential energy into an active living force'.¹³³ To the farmers themselves, tumbledown was characteristic of unmitigated failure. Vast acres of fields over-run by weeds not only promoted the dominance of nature, but also an encroachment of a 'wilderness' upon the 'civilized' countryside. Therefore, for Ruralists, the presence of tumbledown implied farmers had failed in this patriotic duty, a point further reinforced by an increased dependence on overseas foodstuffs which could clearly be produced at home.

5.5 The Search for 'Truth'

The story of the Condition of Rural England debate, as has been repeatedly illustrated, was a quest for 'truth', while simultaneously seeking publicity for this new, sensitive reading of agriculture and the depression. The homages of F.E. Green and Rider Haggard to Cobbett and Young referred to earlier were wholly appropriate as each author, on varying spatial scales, similarly toured farming communities to uncover 'real' facts, pragmatically 'fleshing out' and filling in the gaps left by both Royal Commissions on agricultural depression in a popular, literate style.¹³⁴ Rather problematically this created a 'tourist gaze', typical of the rural excursion that fleetingly dipped in and out of local cases of failure. Despite uncovering numerous examples of the minute spatiality of depression, the texts invariably ignored the very evidence uncovered in preference for more generalised statements, perhaps to even fit the national level preconceptions. Popularist treatise such as *Rural England* obviously strove for the middle ground by attempting to interweave two dissimilar representations of the countryside, idealisation and 'reality', for the sake of accuracy and no doubt for book sales to non-agrarian readers, recalling that Haggard's *Rural England* was actually commissioned by *The Daily Express* newspaper. These Ruralist texts tried to reclaim a functional perspective but in doing so they emphasised how much the rural problem had been subsumed into national anxieties at the expense of

actually vocalising the rural community by including debates on race, social justice and psychology. However, the texts also uncovered a discourse of failure from within the industry that was increasingly stale through unremitting fatalism and a penchant for sniping at critics and 'outsiders'.

It would not be too speculative to suggest the national press seized on depression for its topicality and sheer newsworthiness. Intriguingly, such a supposition could actually dispute the sincerity of the Condition of Rural England movement itself. Rider Haggard's conflict of interests in writing *Rural England* for *The Daily Express* is immediately drawn to attention. Arguably Haggard was prone to employing journalistic devices that sought dramatic but not necessarily typical representations of distress. This has wider implications for the whole Condition of Rural England movement, raising fears that rather than magnanimously convey the intense suffering of those connected to the soil, even Ruralists resorted to satiating sadistic instincts to watch unscrupulous landowners and inherently baneful farmers suffer - labourers were reduced to bit-part players. The issue of the media was a complex question, and one not dealt with adequately by the Condition of Rural England writers because of their own vested interests. Obviously the motivation for writing Ruralist texts was to confront media myths, yet by reporting failures and successes from standard locations such as Dengie or Catshill, media reference points are repeated and reinforced, their signification accruing yet more meaning, with reality buried beneath layers of informed and not so informed judgement. Rather than counter the media question, the Condition of Rural England writers unwittingly create further questions about the positionality of their own work.

Though the writers aimed for objectivity, each, naturally, carried various political, economic and social prejudices. Haggard in his introduction to *Rural England* is at pains to stress his impartiality, drawing inspiration from the cool commentaries of Arthur Young rather than the explosive polemic of William Cobbett that remained 'too highly tinged with the hue of the writers own political opinions', but ultimately he fails to recognise the inherent bias in his own work, propagated by his selection of witnesses.¹³⁵ Describing the requisite qualities of any author undertaking a rural survey Haggard suggests 'his mind should be that of a trained lawyer, able to weigh and sift evidence, discriminating between the true and the false, the weighty and the trivial'.¹³⁶ By striving for a 'true' picture there is a sense of pursuing a moral quest for objectivity. William Cooper was to conclude his assault on the failures of agriculture by stating that 'the searchlight of Truth has been freely utilised in the foregoing chapters'.¹³⁷ A review of *Rural England* complimented Haggard on a commendable attempt at an 'impartial and honest' collection of what were, in essence, biased and very bitter opinions expressed by embattled farmers.¹³⁸ In his conclusion, Haggard notes that he has 'weighed and sifted' the evidence,

refusing to record anything that he did not believe to be the 'truth'.¹³⁹ Truth for Haggard, therefore, was not an abstract concept shaped by his pen, but 'real' as expressed by his witnesses and therefore obtainable. The logical conclusion, is that the greater the accumulation of witnesses, the greater the probability of ascertaining the 'true' sentiments of the farming community. Unfortunately Haggard overstates the incontestability of the many testimonies he recounts by accentuating the convictions of landowners and farmers at the expense of the vocalty of the labourer.¹⁴⁰ This is a critical omission on Haggard's part, not least as F.E. Green realised, because there existed a genuine need to render the labouring voice audible. Green believed that from within this agrarian class the freshest and most spontaneous ideas for improving village welfare were composed.¹⁴¹ Instead, in *Rural England*, farm workers were portrayed as questionable, awkward and generally inarticulate. Such intolerance undermined the validity of Haggard's version of 'truth' simply because he silenced the majority engaged in farming, and his justification for this class bias remained unconvincing. 'Hitherto, the views presented to the readers of this book', he writes at approximately the halfway stage of volume one, 'have in the main, of necessity, been those of the landowner, the land agent and the farmer. As all who are acquainted with him know, the labourer is very sly, also he is suspicious'.¹⁴² Haggard even suggests that the content of any labourers speech was at best, untrustworthy, empowered by the rhetoric of earlier union campaigns of Joseph Arch and an awareness of the straightened circumstances of their employers.¹⁴³ The solution to this spurious 'problem' of ascertaining the degree of 'truth' was to enter into correspondence with people who 'understood' the labourer's mind, self-styled conduits of opinion between social classes, such people as Dr Killick, the medical officer for the parish and district of Williton in Somerset. Haggard introduces Killick to his readers thus:

*I propose...to begin my remarks on the county of Somerset by giving prominence to the views of Dr Killick, a man who for years has made a study of the labouring classes there. This gentleman is moreover, in true sympathy with their trials and grievances, with which his profession brings him into daily contact, and therefore is well qualified to speak for them.*¹⁴⁴

What this rather ill-conceived statement reveals apart from the obvious continuation of class antagonism within the rural milieu, is the intense disunity of the disparate farming voices, to the extent that the labouring viewpoint was rendered silent thus enabling the less complicated depiction of farming that Haggard sought. Haggard was not alone in securing co-operative action amongst all farming classes. M.P. Hayward in an essay entitled *Fiscal Reform: The only remedy for agriculture and other industrial depression* more contentiously suggested that there did exist a common cause which all those connected to agriculture could fight for: the abolition of Free Trade policies

with respect to agriculture.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, the editorial approach of ignoring obvious disharmonies between the agricultural classes, shifted attention from two criticisms of farming: firstly, landed paternalism and agrarian capitalism could not mix successfully and secondly, fierce individuality amongst farmers would never create a harmonious and united front in opposition to foreign competition. Haggard recognised this multivocality proved complicated and unhelpful. Undoubtedly, if he established any uniformity in opinion then this was accomplished by a disregard for alternative vocalities within the farming community. Supporters of farming frequently attested that agricultural interests could have been the 'greatest [most vibrant] in the nation', but disunity impaired progress towards an authoritative voice.¹⁴⁶ Haggard claimed agriculture was the most 'voiceless' of all special interests, and as such it was rendered politically helpless.¹⁴⁷ By essentialising disparate views, a more focused, digestible and thereby forceful reading of the farming viewpoint was obtainable at the expense of regionality and difference.

The struggle for complete objectivity became a pre-occupation of Victorian rural commentators. It was ironic, however, that rural realist writers within the *Condition of Rural England* genre were probably those most heavily invested with the solemnity of agricultural depression. A.I. Shand asserted that though some substance existed to the morality and non-materialism of the Picturesque representation of the countryside, there was a need, particularly with reference to the cottager to seek an underlying reality.¹⁴⁸ Art, according to critics such as R.P. Collier was responding to a quest for realism in a depiction of 'obvious truths of nature' and it was a natural progression for literature to follow suit.¹⁴⁹ Indicative of the new backdrop of depression Collier noted 'artists now condescended to paint, and to paint carefully, weeds, grass, brambles and ferns'. As Yi-Fu Tuan reveals, the realistic aims of art assumed that there existed a cultural structure in place that enabled people to collectively read meanings in essentially the same way.¹⁵⁰ In a late nineteenth-century context, the closest we come to this assertion was within the middle-class anti-modernist, rural nostalgic drive. Similarly, the photographic medium supposedly revealed 'truth', though invariably compositions were staged to reflect what Raphael Samuel termed the 'poetics of labour'.¹⁵¹

For *Condition of Rural England* observers, the contemporary theoretical reconstruction of a notion of England from both Socialists like Blatchford and Hyndman and more reactionary conservative figures also had to embrace the existence of the village as a living, organic community suggesting that those who wrote on the rural possessed a responsibility to write a truthful and less poetic reality. However, a definitive 'truth' was unobtainable, reflected in the different nature and focus of the texts, despite the continued re-visiting of certain sites symbolically loaded with references to failure, such as Essex. Ruralist authors identified a need for 'truth', yet

without exception they allow their texts to over-flow with rhetoric. It is ironic that an historical reading of the texts today renders the exuberant delivery the most eminently meaningful, representing as it does, unparalleled insights into the mindset of those connected with the fortunes of agriculture.

5.6 Summary

Ultimately, the Condition of Rural England issue proved complex and contradictorily. Firstly, it never achieves the objectivity that inspired the need to write 'realistically'. The vision of the rural ideal proved too attractive and persistent to overcome, not least because the writers inadvertently reinforced it by adding greater credibility to the southern myth. As James Long was to write, 'far be it from the writer to desire to destroy this illusion [the idyll], to judge or condemn - for who is he who doeth not those things that he condemneth?'¹⁵² Secondly, despite the involvement of popular figures such as Rider Haggard the production of truthful accounts represented little more than a cottage industry. As noted at the beginning of the chapter, it remains extremely doubtful that a literary campaign on behalf of the countryside was actually consciously recognized by Victorians and Edwardians, not least because of differing political backgrounds of the authors involved. The danger is that historians and historical geographers can conclude too broad an influence of the movement, when in fact most books and pamphlets sold poorly, being very much a minority interest. The aim of this chapter has been to show, however, how certain myths of depression were established in a national-level literary resource.

At all times the idea that rural England was above normal political divisions and even economic systems with the simultaneous rejection of agrarian capitalism and semi-feudalism is evident. However, one aspect within which the literature did contribute to popular debate was the establishment of the rural population as a superior racial breed, applying the intellectual vogue for pseudo-science within sociological texts to validate a number of cultural assumptions and fears, bridging an improbable gap between the failure of wheat crops with biological inheritance.

¹H.R. Haggard, *Rural England* Vol. II (London 1902) 541.

²H. Chaytor, *Agricultural and Trade Depression* (1880) 9.

³P. Cloke, and N. Thrift, Refiguring the 'Rural' in P. Cloke; M. Doel; D. Matless; M. Phillips and N. Thrift (Eds) *Writing the Rural - Five Cultural Geographies* (London 1994) 3.

⁴M.J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline in the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (Cambridge 1981); A. Howkins, *The Discovery of Rural England* (London 1986) 63; S. Heathorn, 'Let us remember that we, too, are English': Constructions of Citizenship and National Identity in English Elementary School Reading Books, 1880-1914 *Victorian Studies* 38 (1995) 395-429; S. Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Cambridge, Mass. 1983) 1.

⁵B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London 1983).

⁶The phrase is borrowed from Williams and Smith. However, Paul Rich expresses scepticism that the 'idea' of England ever achieved any great ideological precision. But a sharper definition of the idea of England was often neglected in favour of the pastoral myth, offering what Roy Porter would term a 'supportive role' which presented a form of spiritual compensation to the harsher realities of English life. C. Williams and A.D. Smith, The National Construction of Social Space *Progress in Human Geography* 7 (1983) 502-518. P.B. Rich, The Quest For Englishness *History Today* 37.6 (1987) 24-30; P.B. Rich, *Prospero's Return: Historical Essays on Race, Culture and British Society* (London 1994) 11; P. Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: the national past in contemporary Britain* (London 1985); R. Porter, *Myths of the English* (Cambridge 1992) 4.

⁷John Rennie Short suggests from 'ancient times' societies have displayed a pastoral attitude to the countryside. The nineteenth-century vision is therefore a further accretion to the number of mythical layers of poetic fantasy. Paul Thompson asserts this 'collective' imagining was actually divided along class lines so that the upper and middle classes developed a complete rural culture based upon paternalism, while the vision of the Socialist left was a more democratic vision of a similar milieu, which through figures such as Robert Blatchford and Henry Hyndman as well as obvious figures such as William Morris and the Arts and Crafts pioneers, celebrated the old peasant existence. J.R. Short, *Imagined Country: Environment, Culture and Society* (London 1991) 28; P. Thompson, *The Edwardians: the remaking of British Society* (London 1992) 180-181.

⁸Mendilow has most recently recognized how the 'Merrie England' myth was even manipulated to shape future visions of a 'new' countryside modelled upon a nostalgic vision of the past, stating 'the hopes of the future-directed myth could therefore best be realised by the fulfilment of the past-directed one'. J. Mendilow, Merrie England and the Brave New World: Two Myths of the Idea of Empire *History of European Ideas* 6 (1985) 41-58.

⁹Howkins proposes a conscious division between the village which was organic and real and the town, which was inherently 'unreal'. However, the term 'real England' was deeply ironic, because of the added connotation, as employed by the Victorians, that such a landscape actually existed. A. Howkins, (1986) *Op Cit.* 63.

¹⁰Raymond Williams suggests the idyll as a compensating image was made by a 'triumphant urban and industrial economy'. Undoubtedly there had been economic success, but the longing for an idyll equally reflected a society riven with cultural insecurities rather than one which was economically 'triumphant'. R. Williams, *The Country and the City* (London 1973) 428.

¹¹L. Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford 1988) 40.

¹²Dyhouse warns it would be misleading to attribute this self-analytical debate to purely religious uncertainties, social tensions and most importantly, economic failure. Indeed, Dyhouse suggests that equally critics praised the spectacular successes of Britain, rejecting notions of 'depression', both social and economic, outright. C. Dyhouse, *The Condition of England 1860-1900* (London 1978) 71.

¹³F. MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life of Our Time* (London 1994) 25.

¹⁴C.F.G. Masterman, one of the more notable 'Little Englanders' of the period, wrote in his 1905 publication *In Peril of Change* that 'Little Englandism' could be defined as 'a nationalism which, on the one hand, passionately asserts a mystical and entire devotion to its own land, on the other, a respect for the devotion of others'. C.F.G. Masterman, *In Peril of Change* (London 1905).

¹⁵B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London 1983); J. Anderson, Nationalist Ideology and Territory in R.J. Johnston; D. Knight and E. Kofman (Eds) *Nationalism, Self Determination and Political Geography* (London 1988).

¹⁶Particularly interesting examples of the 'Little England' genre include C.F.G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* (London 1909); R.C.K. Ensor, The English Countryside in L. Oldenshaw (Ed) *England: A Nation* (London 1904) and G.K. Chesterton, The Patriotic Idea in L. Oldenshaw (Ed) *England: A Nation* (London 1904). Masterman wrote in 1901 that a 'wave of Imperialism' had dampened much reformist spirit of 'Little Englanders' extant at the end of the nineteenth-century, particularly with relation to land reform and other similar schemes of 'social amelioration'. C.F.G. Masterman, Realities at Home in C.F.G. Masterman (Ed) *The Heart of the Empire* 3.

¹⁷Bound up within this apprehension was, as Philip Lowe identifies, the intellectual and popular assertion of a notion of preservation. The safeguarding of the countryside proved a popular cause because no one ideology lay special claims to it. Thus, Ruralists could be progressive and conservative. P. Lowe, The Rural Idyll Defended: from preservation to conservation in G. Mingay (Ed) *The Rural Idyll* (London 1989).

¹⁸The concessionary nature of the Ruralists meant commentators embroiled in debate did not adopt an agrarian fundamentalist stance that asserted agriculture to be the basis of all wealth. Elizabeth Tonkin's definition of realism as a 'point of view about the proper significance of certain events' is especially pertinent in defining the objectives of the Condition of Rural England movement and its attempts to convey the importance of the agricultural depression upon the wider security of the nation. The declining economic position of farming had been noted in both the Royal Commissions on agricultural Depression, though its symbolic significance was still powerfully asserted. E. Tonkin, History and the Myth of Realism in R. Samuel and P. Thompson (Ed) *The Myths We Live By* (London 1990) 25.

¹⁹M.J. Wiener (1981), *Op Cit.* 6. A.I. Shand typically invests arcadian connotations to the back-breaking work of hay-making, even though he sought to distance himself from over-used Picturesque representations. 'All the cottager's excitement and amusement is out of doors', he proselytized, '...among the former are the great annual occasions when they can earn extra wages in a press of work, associated with merriment and indulgences by immemorial custom'. A.I. Shand, Cottagers and Cottages *Cornhill Magazine* 41 (1880) 683-698.

²⁰Baverstock in his study of the English agricultural labourer concedes the notion of 'Hodge' retained unwanted connotations of sentimentality. The act of labelling 'Hodge' was not restricted to authors of interest here. P.A. Graham in an otherwise serious account of the rural exodus, referred to the labourer continually as 'Hodge'. Rev. A.H. Baverstock, *The English Agricultural Labourer* (London 1912) iv. P.A. Graham, *The Rural Exodus: The Problem of the Village and the Town* (London 1892).

²¹'Working alone in large fields, Hodge is an isolated unit living under the roof of a farm-tied cottage rented by his employer, the big farmer, who rules with an unchecked hand of iron over the whole of this countryside'. F.E. Green, *The Awakening of England* (London 1912) 6.

²²In a sense what the movement contended was if rural England was 'real' England, then its physical and economic reality and not its semiological grounding should be grasped by the nation.

²³The Ruralist agenda was not solely restricted to England. Similar debates on *patria* and the land were raised in Europe but most patently in the United States where in 1908 President Roosevelt set up a Country Life Commission to investigate, amongst other questions, the absence of a 'highly organised rural society'. E. Pratt, *Small Holders: What They Must do To Succeed* (Oxford 1909) 212-214.

²⁴Silverstick, as early as 1879 lambasted the political neglect of agriculture, not least because it implied the agricultural position had been negated. 'We often hear of agriculture and the vast systems around and underlying it, spoken of as if the whole matter lies in a nut-shell, to be dismissed and relegated to the position of a branch of industry which affected but the smallest portion of the body politic'. "Silverstick", *What Shall We Do? A treatise on the Present Agricultural Depression, Its Causes, Effects and Remedies* (Bishop's Stortford 1879) 3. This disaffection with the political solution was, for Templar, detectable in the farming community, adding 'agriculturalists know quite well that politics and declamation against the land-laws will not help the crops to grow'. "Templar", *Agricultural Distress and the Royal Commission* (London n.d.).

²⁵J.W. Martin, *The Ruin of Rural England: A Warning* (London 1901) 183.

²⁶By the 1890s, agriculture in the popular imagination had been peripheralized as a rather marginal element both in cultural and economic terms. Furthermore, as 'Agricola' in a correspondence to *The Times* noted, outside observers had accused the industry of feigning its own distress while still residing in luxury and comfort, 'keeping hunters, drink[ing] champagne [with] their wives and daughters above work'. *The Times* 26 December 1895, col. c, 12 - Letter on Agricultural Distress by 'Agricola'.

²⁷H.R. Haggard (1902), *Op Cit.*, 2-3. Haggard's proximity to Government was critical if the Condition of Rural England movement was to flourish. Eventually, he was allowed to employ his expert advice on behalf of the government when he landed a Royal Commissioners role investigating coastal erosion. In the previous year he had also been commissioned to report on the Salvation Army land colonies (1905).

²⁸J.W. Martin, *Op Cit.* 1.

²⁹H.R. Haggard (1902), *Op Cit.* 2.

³⁰J.W. Martin, v.

³¹The sense that Empire dominated England proved unpalatable to many. Masterman quotes an unnamed 'Little England' partisan from Essex who firmly believed 'those glowing patriots who, in their anxiety to build up an Empire, have been grabbing at continents and lost their own land'. C.F.G. Masterman (1909), *Op Cit.* 149.

³²G.K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* (London 1936) 130.

³³The ambiguities of political doctrine with regard to the English countryside are evident in an attack from the Tory Right by W.H. Mallock. Dismissing the depression and the resultant upheaval in the countryside as politically inspired myth, he contended that Masterman's longing for lost English values, the traditional Conservative standpoint, could not disguise an underlying attempt to preserve cherished values through Radical reform, most typically land reform. W.H. Mallock, *Current Misconceptions of the Agricultural Problem Nineteenth Century and After* 74 (1913) 1105-1125.

³⁴C.F.G. Masterman (1909), *Op Cit.* 47.

³⁵The 'theories' are not necessarily stated, but they generally involved realistic conceptions of failure, practical remedies, and an emphasis on the political expediency of vocalising the farming community of all classes.

³⁶Haggard's work can be read at a number of levels. Thus *Rural England* could be both functionalist and romantic while *A Farmer's Year* could be, as Cohen suggests, read as an instruction to farmers if not directly falling into the category of an almanac. His last and now forgotten rural work, *Rural Denmark* even took the shape of a manifesto for his reformist ideas which were almost as radical, in terms of agricultural upheaval as Jesse Collings's small holding campaign. M. Cohen, *Rider Haggard: His Life and Work* (London 1968) 163; H.R. Haggard, *A Farmer's Year* (London 1899).

³⁷F.E. Green (1912), *Op Cit.* 1.

³⁸Clearly, Bear is alluding to the physical degeneracy debates of the time, though the future society has recognised the sources of degeneracy and has sought to eradicate them through education. W.E. Bear, *An Agricultural Rip van Winkle* (London 1892) 10-12.

³⁹'We cannot recall an instance, except that of Mr Haggard, in which a distinguished writer has beaten his inkstand into a ploughshare. In "Rural England", so far as we are aware, for the first time, a man who has achieved a great success in literature has studied, practised and written on English farming.' Anon., *The Needs of Rural England Quarterly Review* 197 (1903) 540-569.

⁴⁰Some of the most notable technical articles which pre-empted the Condition of Rural England writers in their attempt to seek a wider understanding of agricultural depression included: H. Joulie, *On Permanent and Temporary Meadows and Pasture: their fluctuations in the economy of agricultural practice Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 18 (2nd series) (1882) 195-222; R.H. Rew, *Farm Revenue and Capital Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 6 (3rd series) (1895) 30-47; W.E. Bear, *Unfair Competition Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 6 (3rd series) (1895) 243-257.

⁴¹H.R. Haggard, (1902), Vol. II 553.

⁴²A. Howkins (1986), *Op Cit.* 67.

⁴³Interestingly, Saul suggests the largest population decline actually occurred in the 1860s during the middle of the so-called 'Golden Age' of High Farming, disputing somewhat, the myth that depression accelerated a population exodus. J.S. Nicholson, *The Relations of Rents, Wages and Profits in Agriculture, and their Bearing on Rural Population* (London 1906) 131; S.B. Saul, *The Myth of the Great Depression 1873-96* (London 1964).

⁴⁴Alun Howkins has more than adequately theorized Haggard's role within the English rediscovery of a rural consciousness, critical to Victorian longing for the past and consequent formulations of reactionary, yet stable forms of Englishness. A. Howkins, *Rider Haggard and Rural England: an essay in literature and history* in C. Shaw and M. Chase (Eds) *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* (Manchester 1989).

⁴⁵M. Cohen, *Op Cit.* 161.

⁴⁶H.R. Haggard, *She* (London 1887); H.R. Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines* (London 1884); H.R. Haggard, *Allan Quartermain* (London 1887).

⁴⁷H.R. Haggard, *The Days of My Life: An Autobiography* (London 1926) 142.

⁴⁸The prosaic style of the Condition of Rural England movement was based upon a narration of experience, and unlike some detached commentaries on the state of the nation, observations were far from passive. Haggard's farming credentials were genuine. *A Farmer's Year* was an exploration of how new ideas and careful investment of capital and effort would fare under extremely difficult conditions, by recounting one year upon his 370 acre farm on his Ditchingham estate in East Norfolk. H.R. Haggard (1899) *Op Cit.* 461. Haggard had always to prove his agricultural credentials. Even before the publication of *A Farmer's Year*, he had written to *The Times* to stress that any public comments he had made on agriculture were based purely on his own experience as a farmer and not a wealthy fiction writer. *The Times* 8 January 1895, col. f, 14; H.G. Hutchinson, *Sir Rider Haggard's Autobiography Edinburgh Review* 244 (1926) 343-356.

⁴⁹Morton Cohen, in editing the numerous correspondences between Rider Haggard and his close friend, the writer Rudyard Kipling, notes Kipling believed *Rural England* to be 'one of the most important agricultural histories in the language'. See M. Cohen (Ed), *Rudyard Kipling to Rider Haggard - The Record of a Friendship* (London 1965) 48. Haggard's maverick status was undoubtedly attributable in part to his Ruralist ideology that could at once support the Socialist ideal of confiscating land for the conversion of small holdings (he believed land held by the church was a good place to inaugurate a land reform programme), yet simultaneously extol the virtues of paternalism, though *informed* landlordism. He stood as a Conservative M.P. in 1895 for North Norfolk, yet admitted to making a poor Tory had he been elected. Tom Pocock claims evidence suggests Haggard had even attended a lecture by George Bernard Shaw to the Fabian Society, enhancing his 'interest' in Socialist ideas. P.B. Ellis, *H. Rider Haggard: A voice from the infinite* (London 1978) 148; T. Pocock, *Love of the Land Country Life* 2 September (1993a).

⁵⁰Haggard's adoption of 'realist' prose was not readily accepted by many critics of the day. *A Farmer's Year* in particular was lampooned in *Punch* (15/11/1899) in a satirical article which narrated the life of a Norfolk ostrich farmer, clearly spoofing Haggard's attempts at breeding the animal on a three thousand acre estate at Newcastle, near Pretoria. T. Pocock, *Rider Haggard and the Lost Empire* (London 1993b) 34.

⁵¹H.R. Haggard, (1926), Vol. II 132. The autobiography had been written in 1912, but publication was withheld until after Haggard's death.

⁵²H.R. Haggard, (1899), *Op Cit.* 466.

⁵³As shall be explored later, there was a degree of regional specificity to such representations which tended to favour a southern English backdrop.

⁵⁴S.L. Bensusan, *Latter-Day Rural England* (London 1927) 20.

⁵⁵F.E. Green (1912), *Op Cit.* 19-26 and 73-81 respectively.

⁵⁶*Ibid.* 213.

⁵⁷These debates were typically played out in the national press or governmental reports on countryside issues. Most famously in the Essex case, the fortunes of agriculture in that particular county received exceptionally close scrutiny from both Royal Commission investigating agricultural depression.

⁵⁸The argument here is that national-level concepts were geographically *insensitive*, failing to recognise the importance of location in space in determining economic outcomes.

⁵⁹Chapter Two considered how landowners attempted to shape farming opinion, particularly in response to depression, within their own paternal vision. Chapter Three aims to extend this debate further by establishing the Ruralist position on the role of landowners in agriculture.

⁶⁰An invective from William Cooper best illustrates the point. He asserted land was a basic human right, its occupation was 'its primary use'. However, there existed a patriotic and state responsibility to ensure the land system worked effectively. 'If national interests suffer [through landlord mismanagement]...it is the manifest duty of the state to take such steps as may be necessary to ensure a return to those conditions under which national prosperity may be re-established and maintained'. Sir William Cooper, *The Murder of Agriculture: A National Peril* (Letchworth 1908) 230-231.

⁶¹Paul Thompson suggests the British upper classes possessed an historic ability to adapt. With the collapse of agricultural prices following the onset of depression, the landed aristocracy turned to other sources for income such as the stock market or as proven by the conversion of farm land into game land, a complete overhaul of land management practices. P. Thompson, *Op Cit.* 192.

⁶²F.E. Green (1912), *Op Cit.* 289-291

⁶³*Ibid.*

⁶⁴The 'reality' in this context appears to be the political jostling for power and the territorialization of economic control. 'Reality' of countryside management was not in landlord eyes, the physical working of the soil.

⁶⁵Sir John Lawes echoed similar sentiments before the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. In giving evidence he was firmly convinced that agriculture could resolve the present crisis by unifying. '[I]...would not despair of British agriculture if both the landlord and the tenant were to join together...'. J. Lawes, (1897) Final Report of the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression. Cd 8540, q40,976.

⁶⁶"Templar", *Op Cit.* 27.

⁶⁷The implication was the aristocracy had betrayed their patriotic duty to maintain a healthy and stable state for the perceived primary industry of the nation.

⁶⁸F.E. Green (1912), *Op Cit.* 119.

⁶⁹D. Tallerman, Agricultural Distress and the Trade Depression: Their Remedy in the Commercial Realization of Home-Grown Produce (1889) ix.

⁷⁰Ibid. 96.

⁷¹Rider Haggard was, after all, a Norfolk landowner, and had been born into the local squirearchy.

⁷²Evershed had twenty years earlier promoted a similar ethos, suggesting that 'good landlords...preceded good tenants on the ground. H. Evershed, State and Prospects of English Agriculture *Quarterly Review* 154 (1882) 175-210.

⁷³The basis for such statements lay in an assertion that if the present land holding system was to remain intact, then it had to recognise the increasing responsibility needed to ensure the productive survival of agriculture. F.L. Soper, a vehement critic of landlordism suggested that if the land system was to prevail then 'landlords are doubtless responsible to the nation for the way in which they use their power'. One example of progressive landlordism was the adoption of small-scale peasant holding schemes. At the time when the re-distribution of land holding materialised as a particularly viable solution, following the success of the Danish and Belgian models, programmes such as attempted on the estates of Lord Wantage's became highly seductive, if not overtly successful approaches to attack some of the causes of depression. F.L. Soper, *Landlordism: What it is, What it does, and What should be done about it* (n.d.) 2; Lord Wantage, *Small Farms Fortnightly Review* 41 (new series) (1887) 70-83.

⁷⁴H.R. Haggard, *Op Cit.* Vol. II 575.

⁷⁵The popularization of the small holding solution during the first decade of the twentieth century was supported by a recognition from Condition of Rural England writers of the central importance of comprehensive land reform.

⁷⁶P.A. Graham suggested that landlord absenteeism had become a 'grievance to which the rustic mind is keenly alive'. P.A. Graham, *Op Cit.* 16.

⁷⁷Green succinctly summarized this autocratic neglect, declaring that 'where pheasants are wanted, the peasant is not'. F.E. Green(1912), *Op Cit.* 8.

⁷⁸J.W. Martin (1901), *Op Cit.* 153. Haggard's comments were equally venomous. He believed '...vast estates acquired...merely for the purposes of pomp and pleasure, and not that the land or its population may be advantaged, are an actual source of evil'. H.R. Haggard (1902), *Op Cit.*, Vol. I 29.

⁷⁹H.R. Haggard (1902), *Op Cit.*, Vol. II 573.

⁸⁰The celerity of suburban growth was manifest within the difficulty statisticians faced when attempted to ascertain the degree of out-migration. Tradition rural district boundaries had been rendered obsolete by urban expansion, prompting a need to redefine an understanding of the term 'rural'. G.B. Longstaff, Rural Depopulation *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 56 (1893) 380-433.

⁸¹H.R. Haggard (1902), Vol. II 235. Board of Agriculture (1906) *The Land and the Decline in the Agricultural Population 1881-1906 - Report of the Land Enquiry Committee*, Cd 3273.

⁸²J.W. Martin, *Op Cit.*, 2.

⁸³Green effectively conveys the landlords ignorance of conditions by recounting a case where he had informed the local landowner cottages on her estate had only stagnant ponds on which to draw their water supply. Green picks up the tale, '...she called with her agent, upon one of the unfortunate cottagers who fearful of consequences said that he himself had made no complaint. And yet impelled either by a sense of humour or by yokel simplicity, he invited his landlady and her agent in turn to partake of a glass of water. But neither the landlady nor her agent were thirsty that afternoon!' F.E. Green (1912), *Op Cit.* 272.

⁸⁴'We are confronted...by an actual famine of cottage accommodation in rural England. The majority of the cottages in the country are old and ill-provided with the essentials of health and decency'. Anon., The Cottage Problem *The Spectator* 83 4 November (1899) 651-652.

⁸⁵Green was not alone in recognising the distinction between the rustic country cottage and the tumble-down, disease-ridden alternative. 'Devonshire cottages look quite idyllic standing among the gardens and orchards of that picturesque county', wrote Richard Heath, 'but [they were]...except upon the estate of a few landowners, in a deplorable condition'. R. Heath, *English Peasant Studies: Historical, Local and Biographic* (London 1893) 81.

⁸⁶[Haggard] appears to be constitutionally inclined to pessimism...its ['Rural England'] message is too negative and too half-hearted to excite enthusiasm.' Anon. (1903) *The Needs of Rural England*. Interestingly, such statements revealed an acceptance of Haggard as a spokesperson for the agricultural community.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*

⁸⁸James Long in his volume, *The Coming Englishman*, was particularly sensitive to the effortlessness that farmers slipped into a downcast nature. 'How often we have seen those days lamented when, in future years, a man with mind matured finds life a blank - the past a waste, the future unprepared'. J. Long, *The Coming Englishman* (London 1909) 255.

⁸⁹Similar claims were made by J.W. Root in a privately published pamphlet on the rural exodus, in which he contrasted American optimism with British weariness. In Britain '...the future is regarded with despondency, and a belief, if not universal, at least widely prevalent, that evil days are in store and that nothing but the most strenuous effort will prevent the nation being displaced from the position it has so long occupied'. The economic vision of the farmer was further called into question by a letter to *The Times* signed 'A Peer', questioning the short-sightedness of farmers during the 'good times', such as high farming. S. Walpole, *The State of Agriculture at Home and Abroad Edinburgh Review* 157 (1883) 138-167; J.W. Root, *The Depopulation of the Rural Districts* (Liverpool 1901) 5; *The Times* 7 July 1879 col. b, 9; S. Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (London 1968) 18.

⁹⁰Cooper relates the wider late nineteenth-century intellectual malaise with a similar crisis of ideas within the farming community. M. Teich and R. Porter (Eds) *Fin de Siècle and Its Legacy* (Cambridge 1990) 1; W. Lacqueur, *Fin de siècle: Once More With Feeling Journal of Contemporary History* 31 (1996) 5-49.

⁹¹Cooper, Sir William (1908), *Op Cit.* v. The analogy with sleep proves particularly fitting when related to F.E. Green's belief in the need for an 'Awakening of England'.

⁹²Haggard lamented the spirit shown by the remark was 'far too common' among British husbandmen, claiming it as 'one of the causes of their [the farmer] failures to cope with these difficult times'. H.R. Haggard (1902), Vol. I *xiii*.

⁹³"Retired Norfolk Farmer" illustrates how one farm could act as a microcosm for all British holdings, regardless of geography, size or individual personalities. 'The loss to farmers generally during the three years from Michaelmas 1875 to Michaelmas 1878 was fairly illustrated by the figures and facts published in *The Times* of 2nd July...proving from the well-kept accounts of a first rate tenant farmer, well known in the eastern counties, that a loss of at least £400 a year has been sustained on a judiciously managed farm of 600 acres'. "Retired Norfolk Farmer" *Agricultural Depression* (Brighton 1879) 8.

⁹⁴Chaplin, a prominent Protectionist, was very much a landlord in traditional mode, to the extent that he was given the sobriquet, 'the squire'. Ensor did concede, however, that despite rather shaky beginnings, the creation of the Board of Agriculture had set 'a ball rolling' which eventually led to the development of a centre of agricultural intelligence. R.C.K. Ensor, *England 1870-1914* (Oxford 1936) 286.

⁹⁵N. Koning, *The Failure of Agrarian Capitalism* (London 1994) 145.

⁹⁶*The Times* 8 January 1895, col. d, 8.

⁹⁷J.W. Martin, *Op Cit.* 3.

⁹⁸The Hon. Mrs Evelyn Cecil suggested that it was a widely held opinion that the 1870 Education Act had been directly responsible for the agricultural depression by encouraging the exodus from the soil. Hon. Mrs Evelyn Cecil, *The Changing Countryside* *The Edinburgh Review* 233 (1921) 316-329. For a discussion on increased labour inefficiency see R. Lennard, *Economic Notes on English Agricultural Wages* (London 1914) 38.

⁹⁹H.R. Haggard (1902), *Op Cit.* Vol. I 270.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.* 297.

¹⁰¹Tellingly Haggard notes the futility of pursuing an argument in favour of education with such closed minds. *Ibid.* 297 and 368.

¹⁰²H.R. Haggard (1902), *Op Cit.* Vol. II 545.

¹⁰³J.L. Cowlard, *The Present Agricultural Depression in Devon and Cornwall and How to Meet It* (London 1879) 15.

¹⁰⁴A.M. Brown, Among the Labouring People: a rural retrospect *Blackwoods Magazine* 150 (1891) 842-849.

¹⁰⁵The Interdepartmental Committee reported the ideas of Pécault were particularly relevant to England and that they should receive special consideration by those 'charged with the conduct and control of rural schools'. See Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration (1904) Vol. I, Part ii, Section *iv*, para. 195, 36. Cd 2175.

¹⁰⁶H. Liversidge, *Farming: Present Condition and Future Prospects - A Scheme for the Relief of the Present Depression* (Selby 1890) 4.

¹⁰⁷One clear expression of this southern bias is contained in Green's chapter on poor moorland holdings. Instead of focusing, most obviously on a northern location, his attention is directed towards farms on the Dorset heathlands. Indeed, Green's spatial conception of England was particularly disembodied from actual political boundaries, as he dedicates the longest chapter in *The Awakening of England* to Ireland, or 'John Bull's other island' as he phrases it. F.E. Green (1912), *Op Cit.* 121-135, 167-209.

¹⁰⁸There are some exceptions in the form of Surrey, Berkshire, Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire. T.W. Fletcher, *The Great Depression in English Agriculture, 1873-96* *Economic History Review* 13 (2nd series) (1961) 417-32; P.J. Perry, Where was the 'Great Depression in Agriculture?': a geography of bankruptcy in late Victorian England and Wales *Agricultural History Review* 20 30-45.

¹⁰⁹H.R. Haggard (1902), *Op Cit.* Vol. II. 569.

¹¹⁰Hynes identifies the crisis of modernity as an Edwardian trait that undoubtedly had its origins in the final two decades of the nineteenth-century. S. Hynes, *Op Cit.* vii.

¹¹¹J.R. Short, *Op Cit.* 77.

¹¹²This develops the theme proposed by Duncan and Duncan that landscapes can be easily read as a transformation of ideologies. J.S. Duncan, and N.G. Duncan, (Re)reading the Landscape *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 6 117-126.

¹¹³In a love of the past, the rising suburban middle-classes embraced rather than revolted against the past, thus in England, as Peter Fuller asserts, there was no 'clash' between the traditional values of the *ancien régime* and the emergent bourgeoisie. In France, as Hollister Sturges attests, little support existed for the rural past, though the modernist drive instilled a mild reaction to the disappearance of old rural institutions, perhaps in part because of the sensitive portrayal of the peasant by artistic figures such as Breton. The differences in the French and English experiences confirm Jeffrey Herf's assertion that countries undertook differing routes towards cultural modernity. P. Fuller, Neo-Romanticism: a Defence of English Pastoralism in P. Fuller (Ed) *Images of God: The Consolations of Lost Illusions* (London 1985) 83-91; A Howkins, Peace of the Country *New Statesman and Society* 4 August (1989) 12-13; H. Sturges, Jules Breton: Creator of the Noble Peasant Image in H. Sturges (Ed) *The Rural Vision: France and America in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Omaha 1987) 23.

¹¹⁴Philip Dodd develops this point about the relocation of the dominant voice by suggesting that many writers on the rural 'essence' of England worked out of metropolitan-focused centres such as Oxford, Cambridge and London. P. Dodd, Englishness and the National Culture in R. Colls and P. Dodd (Eds) *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920* (London 1986) 4. P.J. Taylor, The English and Their Englishness: 'a curiously, mysterious, elusive and little understood people' *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 107 (1991) 146-162.

¹¹⁵C. Payne, *Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England, 1780-1890* (London 1993) 3.

¹¹⁶J. Duncan and N. Duncan, Ideology and Bliss: Roland Barthes and the Secret Histories of Landscape in T.J. Barnes and J. Duncan (Eds) *Writing Worlds* (1992) 19.

¹¹⁷Short notes that by looking backwards, national culture promoted the folk traditions which previously defined the nation in the pre-modern age. Most obviously in Victorian Britain, such as revival is pursued in the emergent arts and crafts movement. This placing of a peculiarly English set of ideas upon the landscape also emerges as part of a process whereby the two meanings of the word 'country' - as a rural space and a national/racial homeland - become one. J.R. Short, *Op Cit.* 34 and 75.

¹¹⁸Howkins claims that increasingly the rural south was identified as the source of 'purity, decency, goodness and honesty'. The idealisation process is rather straightforward. Christiana Payne suggests that aesthetic ideas are (and were) entwined with moral issues. Against a backdrop of perceived degeneracy, traditional agricultural practices appealed to a nostalgic longing for the past. A. Howkins (1986), *Op Cit.* 63; C. Payne, *Op Cit.* 1.

¹¹⁹R. Samuel and P. Thompson, *Op Cit.* 3.

¹²⁰M.J. Wiener, *Op Cit.* 42.

¹²¹J.S. Duncan and N.G. Duncan, N.G. (1992) *Op Cit.* 19. A. Howkins (1986), *Op Cit.* 64. Edward Thomas was firmly aware of the rural south's essential qualities when he wrote the eponymous titled text of this peculiar English arcadia, yet for more functionalist observers the southern influence is less explicitly stated. E. Thomas, *The South Country* (London 1907).

¹²²A report in *The Times* on land out of cultivation reveals an undoubted trend towards abandoned land in the south and east of England. On this point, the article suggested that uncultivated land was an issue 'deserving of greater attention'. *The Times* 13 April 1896 col. a, 13. However, Silverstick, admittedly writing at the start of the depression, contended that the depression was national and 'not confined to any one part of the Kingdom'. "Silverstick" *Op Cit.* 4. Paul Thompson suggests that historical evidence proposes that 'the life had been drained out of southern villages'. P. Thompson, *Op Cit.* 26.

¹²³Kinnear noted the worst excesses of depression had not been felt in either the north of England or Scotland, though the misfortune of the south of England was perceived to have created an 'acute' crisis. J.B. Kinnear, Profitable Farming and the Employment of Labour *Blackwoods Magazine* 153 (1893) 24-39.

¹²⁴R.C.K. Ensor (1904), *Op Cit.* 105.

¹²⁵R.E. Prothero, *The Agricultural Depression and the Sufferings of the Clergy* (London 1887) i.

¹²⁶P. Wright, *The Tyranny of the Picturesque* (London 1995).

¹²⁷F.E. Green identifies with Cobbett's eye for the 'beauty of agricultural fecundity'. F.E. Green (1912) *Op Cit.* 10. Albert Pell had similarly noted that there existed an inability amongst the wider public to distinguish the role of agriculture in the shaping of landscape. 'Men are too frequently blind to the difference between land in a state of nature and as they now found it presented to their eyes in an old and settled country such as ours'. A. Pell, *The Making of the Land in England* (London 1899) 3,

¹²⁸S. Kern, *Op Cit.* 153.

¹²⁹H.R. Haggard (1902), *Op Cit.* Vol. I. 29. The notion of utility does not strictly differentiate between peasant or estate farming, though clearly *la petite culture* offered more intensive production. As J.R. Fisher illustrates, this view was not solely a functional Ruralist observation and was also shared by the poetic writing of authors such as A.I. Shand and Richard Jefferies, in an approach that expressed similar distaste for an immutable and outmoded system of land tenure. J.R. Fisher, Public Opinion and Agriculture, 1875-1900 (Unpubl. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Hull 1972).

¹³⁰M. Chase in P. Wright, *The Tyranny of the Picturesque* (London 1995).

¹³¹R. Dayus, *The Present Depression in Agriculture: Its Causes and Remedies* (Shrewsbury 1879) 6.

¹³²F.E. Green (1912) *Op Cit.* 7. In a similar vein, Jesse Collings had reported to the House of Commons on the 16 August 1907, that huge tracts of Wiltshire had been abandoned to couch grass, describing the scene as one that was a 'great national loss'. Hansard Vol. CLXXX (1907) 1829-33.

¹³³Cooper, Sir William (1908), *Op Cit.* 15.

¹³⁴In a sense the authors were trying, as Nochlin supports, to manipulate a sense of place to convey a reality. By offering a location in real space avoids the subjectivity of generalisation as well as rendering the depression tangible. L. Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth Century Art and Society* (London 1991) 20.

¹³⁵H.R. Haggard (1902), *Op Cit.* Vol. I. vii.

¹³⁶*Ibid.* ix.

¹³⁷Cooper, Sir William (1908), *Op Cit.* 251.

¹³⁸Anon. (1903) *The Needs of Rural England*.

¹³⁹H.R. Haggard (1902), *Op Cit.* Vol. II 575.

¹⁴⁰Haggard believed that by reporting *verbatim* the opinions of farmers he could come closer to the rural reality that other authors had failed to achieve or had never bothered to covert anyway. Indeed, he states that one of the motives for writing the book was to '...arrive at the *truth* out of the mouths of many witnesses'. To counter claims that *Rural England* was touched by his own melodramaticism, Haggard affirms 'I have recorded the substance of what each man said to me as he said or wrote it, always from notes taken in his presence, or from written documents with which he has furnished me'. H.R. Haggard (1926), *Op Cit.* 142; H.R. Haggard (1902), *Op Cit.* Vol. I xi.

¹⁴¹Angered by the silencing of the labourer and an arrogance in the patriarchal assumption that only the elite and educated understood the labourer's mind, Green suggested labourers should be allowed to publicise their ideas. In a plea for greater class autonomy and recognition of the validity of the labouring imagination, Green believed that a gradual embracing of the self-help ethos may once again encourage a future rooting to the soil, as well as dissipate the unhelpful class distinctions that ultimately divided farming at its most needful moment. Clearly the intention is to raise the labourers awareness of his self-worth, a factor evidently implicated in the rural exodus, inducing a state of mind naturally beneficial to the future of farming. One example he produces of the possibilities of re-invigorating rustic life was through drama and village hall entertainments. 'Those tiresome amateur theatrical performances by the "local gentry"' he lamented, 'should be superseded by performances given by the rustics themselves portraying their own lives'. F.E. Green (1912), *Op Cit.* 295.

¹⁴²H.R. Haggard (1902), 225.

¹⁴³Haggard suggests that '...in any case, it is difficult to persuade him to talk, or to be sure, when he does talk, that he is saying what is really on his mind'. H.R. Haggard (1926), *Op Cit.* 225.

¹⁴⁴*Ibid.* 226-227.

¹⁴⁵M.P. Hayward was typical among many writers on the agricultural question who attempted to depict agriculture as a mutually supportive industry. M.P Hayward, *Fiscal Reform: The Only Remedy for Agricultural and other Industrial Depression* (Cheltenham 1897) 6.

¹⁴⁶H.R. Haggard (1902) *Op Cit.* Vol. II 574.

¹⁴⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸A.I. Shand, *Op Cit.*.

¹⁴⁹Collier asserts the late-Victorian landscape movement now drew attention to 'the beauty of what used to be grandly ignored as the mere detail of Nature'. R.P. Collier, *Landscape Painting Nineteenth Century* 7 (1880) 1040-1056.

¹⁵⁰Y-F. Tuan, Realism and Fantasy in Art, History and Geography *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 80. (1980).

¹⁵¹R. Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* Vol. 1. (London 1994) 318.

¹⁵²J. Long (1909), *Op Cit.* 152.

Chapter Six: "A Nation of Cockneys": Agricultural Depression, 'Racial Suicide' and the Condition of Rural England, 1879-1914.

6.1 Introduction

Portends of rural racial decay were manufactured by associating agricultural depression with a perceptible decline in calibre of the labour residue succeeding ongoing outmigration. Ironically, to substantiate such claims, the Condition of Rural England writers surrendered, willingly or otherwise, to a romantic belief in the farmer and labourer as English racial archetypes to heighten the seriousness of the rural exodus, a numerical upshot of which left farmers unable to fill vacant farming posts.¹ Rural change was further compounded by an influx of urban values and cultural interests, partly explained by a reverse movement of city dwellers into the countryside and increasing awareness of a more animated social life in the city.² G.M. Trevelyan bemoaned this "cockneyfication" of English villages and the new racial degenerate extant within, fearing the development of an unacceptable ethnic standard amongst impoverished or under-populated parishes.³

Symbolic reverence for agricultural figures was pronounced in both critical social texts in the Masterman vein and specifically agrarian literature. For example, the tradition of superior recruits offered up by the countryside was celebrated. However, following the publication of an assortment of highly critical essays on the standards of recent army enrolees and an embarrassing series of military reversals during the Boer War, fears of a *rural* racial decay were transmuted into wider non-specialist literature where a degeneracy discourse had previously been instituted for an urban context, embellished with pseudo-scientific theories and then infused into governmental concerns, occupying five pages of the final report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration published in 1904.⁴ The committee, assembled to collect evidence from a number of prominent social reformers and racial theorists of the era, signified the apogee of a racial science debate in Britain.⁵ Witnesses included D.J. Cunningham of Edinburgh University and chairman of the British Association for the Advancement of Science; Alfred Eichholz, Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge and H.M. Inspector of Schools; Charles Booth, social reformer and author and Seebolm Rowntree, philanthropist and social critic.⁶ The Committee constructed a hypothesis based upon crude cause and effect models that postulated potential army recruits no longer attained a fit and sizeable standard. Popular belief claimed the enervated urban race, from which most possible soldiers were increasingly drawn, failed to match the physique of traditional recruits, the yeoman farmer and rustic labourer, thus asserting the inherent naturalness of a relationship between virtuous and healthy rural breeding and 'true Englishness'. To comprehend racial degeneracy, anthropologists affirmed the existence of a biologically inherited mean physical

standard.⁷ However, without offering actual physical specifications in support of such a claim, the assertion of a decayed physique remained unsubstantiated.

The rural exodus as sustained by depression provoked an obvious threat to national security, forcing the army to rely on urban runts, the cockney stereotype, to fill the ranks.⁸ Anxieties in regard to an attendant decline in army strength were corroborated for commentators such as Rider Haggard during the Boer War following the frequent submission of British imperial dynamism to an enemy of small holders.⁹ Haggard acknowledged the vigour of the Boer.

*Most of our reverses during the recent war were due to the pitting of town-bred bodies and intelligences...against country-bred bodies and intelligences...we laugh at the Boer for his rude manners and his rusticity, but therein lies a strength.*¹⁰

The Condition of Rural England movement was galvanized by, yet simultaneously intensified an apprehension that further rural population loss would impact beyond a simple labour resource problem.¹¹ Ruralist discourses on failure, neglect and prejudice towards the farming industry accepted the fears promoted by late-Victorian racial-science debate: throughout history the rural worker represented the embodiment of Englishness, but this identification had been threatened by rural flight. Central to this belief was a notion of what Nancy Stepan has termed 'proper place'.¹² The basis of this theory was that each racial group possessed a natural habitat, culturally expressed as a homeland. Clearly, for late nineteenth-century writers of both the Left and Right caught up in a reaction against industrial modernism, rural England, at least the Pastoral version, represented the 'proper place'. Transmigration beyond the boundaries of 'proper place' into alien environments, such as the city slum, thereby contributed to individual physical deterioration and ultimately progressive racial degeneration. With an obvious grounding in the popular racial sciences of the period, 'proper place' theoretical interest lay with Empire, though the conceptual grounding could be, and was, easily reworked to suit a purely Anglo-centric discourse, whereby removal from the invigorating air of rural England engendered the lethargy associated with an enervated urban existence. The neglected component within this cultural crisis had been the agricultural depression, silenced by the clamour for urban reform. Increasingly, however, depression was accepted in multi-dimensional terms: a financial collapse, social turbulence, a patriotic crisis, its importance to ethnic discourses recognised.

Ignoring the economic component in favour of literary texts, portraying failure as a series of mythologised constructs and ideologies, this thesis propounds an alternative conclusion that asserts the basic Condition of Rural England inquest into racial deterioration to be ultimately misleading, fabricated upon wild assumption and nostalgic fantasy rather than material 'facts'. Evidence presented to governmental

inquiries such as the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration proved highly ambiguous. This lent authority to outlandish and untheoretical prognoses on racial decay, distorting degeneracy claims further. Within rural literature, this contortion of evidence distanced the real issue of offering solutions for the recovery of farming.¹³ Inevitably, removal of the young and enterprising degraded the residue rural labourforce in terms of physical productivity, but this physiological truth was confused by greater attachment to less tangible qualities such as an unhelpful belief in allegedly innate racial characteristics, typically virtuousness and assiduity. In line with contemporary racial pseudo-science, post-exodus rural residents were believed to be incapable of reproducing a descendent generation. But no clear statistical evidence was forthcoming beyond an increasingly top-heavy population pyramid to suggest past reproductivity levels were unobtainable. Instead, popular angst lay in a fixation with poetic rather than genetic qualities which were subsequently accepted as biologically inherited, a gossamer-strong theory based upon a simplistic reading of Darwinian thought combined with reactionary cultural values.¹⁴ In reality the real rural crisis was diminished human resources further heightened by a rural population ageing *in situ*. Additional connotations were manufactured by pervasive *fin de siècle* fears of an uncertain age that tied in with moribund predictions for the state of agriculture.¹⁵ Farming protestations of a labour shortage were not strictly connected with biological science, but defined instead by an inability to afford higher, and therefore more competitive, wages over rival urban manufacturing trades.

6.2 *The Thematic Interest Behind Racial Degeneration*

The issue of race and farming allows the development of themes central to this thesis, not least the idea of depression as a social fabrication and the rural milieu as an 'empty vessel' to be filled with political ideology and the cultural symbolism of a nation faced with a directional crisis. My interest is less with militarism *per se*, exploring the agrarian component behind perceived recruitment difficulties and what this reveals about the extension of depression into non-farming debates. By casting doubt on the statistical validity of contemporary claims, it is asserted the agrarian role in physical deterioration debates was overplayed, thus detracting from a real rural dilemma: prevalent complacency and uncompetitiveness amongst English farmers. Three concepts aid analysis of these ideas from an agricultural perspective. Firstly, and most importantly, is the question of occupation, milieu and degeneracy. Making a connection between employment and physique, rustic resilience gained acceptance through social observations by writers such as Chesterton and Masterman.¹⁶ The urban problem received attention through the works of Rowntree, Booth and Andrew

Mearns but without any parallel literature for village life prior to the Condition of Rural England movement, customary depictions of farm labour testified to an imbuing of individuals with patience, health and a sense of morality, offering cherished qualities of restraint and stoic defiance.¹⁷ To comprehend this lapse into romantic portraiture, investigation requires directing initially on both mythical and physical realities of Victorian agriculturalists and secondly, the veneration of rustic workers simultaneous to rural uncertainty. Subscribing to concepts of physical determinism by employment and environment, Eugenic ideas on biological inheritance were rejected, or more likely, ignored by writers aware of a socio-scientific vogue, implying psychological fears were readily translated into physical theories ultimately lacking scientific depth.¹⁸

The second aim pursued by this chapter involves examining the transformation of a labour supply issue contained within the farming community into a national crisis professing potential racial suicide. The terms of reference for the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration (1904) reveal 'state of the race' anxieties originated within a rise in army recruit rejections from physical causes. It is essential, therefore, to uncover how notions of on-going racial decay and the English rural diaspora were joined, making reference to the cultural process that associated an imaginary rural England commonly depicted as the highest expression of patriotic space, with an alternative vision in which over one million people relocated, most alarmingly into the towns and cities. The symbolic significance of rural depopulation from counties such as Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Dorset, Devon, Somerset, Oxfordshire and Essex that constituted the national rural heartland had not been missed.¹⁹

The third and final concept under examination involves broadening investigative remits to establish the nature of the army recruitment problem. Attention will focus upon resultant apprehensions and their imposition by rigid adherence to stylised creations of a resolute and physically superior soldier-farmer ideal. To validate this somewhat mythical figure, statistics were produced that contend rural workers were heavier and taller than recruits from urban-based professions. As a result, the concurrent rural outmigration artificially magnified the army enlistment question.

To explore these concepts, the remainder of the chapter will divide into three sections. Firstly, a debate on the context of racial degeneracy will trace the rise in popularity of various deterioration concepts in relation to the English countryside. An assessment of the superior rural race myth will follow, paying particular attention to how the farming community actually perpetuated such claims. Finally, discussion centres on army recruitment problems while attempting to demonstrate parallels with the rural degeneracy debate that raged simultaneously, drawing upon a diverse literary collection that appeared in farming and popularist journals through to governmental reports.

6.3 Theoretical Background

6.3.1 Socio-Scientific Theory and the Fabrication of Degeneracy

In an atmosphere sensitive to change and an intellectual climate transformed by Eugenic and Social-Darwinist thinking, perceived physical deterioration expressed through recruitment difficulties and the rural exodus caused by prolonged agricultural depression combined to fuel unrestrained and often fanciful notions of racial suicide. Evolutionary ideas were swiftly transposed into measurements of declining physical stature.²⁰ Daniel Pick examined the late-Victorian concept of degeneration and this thesis concurs with his judgement that perceived cultural disorder forced the adoption of pseudo-scientific theories, claiming 'social critique was powerfully inflected by biological theories of decline'.²¹ An affiliation between new discourses of physical decay, a reaction against societal instability and Darwin's evolutionary theory was duly observed. Conjecture over consistent philosophy fused (and confused) biological and environmental factors into a theory of degeneracy. Deterministic statements prevailed proclaiming the effects of urban milieu on each succeeding generation were repeated until diminished physical stature evolved into a biological trait.²²

However, if environmental factors conspired against racial succession, they could equally resolve pronounced deterioration. Leslie Mackenzie, Medical Inspector to the Local Government Board of Scotland, coined the phrase 'generational degeneracy' to suggest that decay could be confined to one generation through improvement in environment, here defined as including housing development.²³ Citing indeterminate degeneracy theory, Charles Pearson, author of the angst-laden text *National Life and Character* identified a clear pessimistic trend into which the Condition of Rural England literature fell, a trait unusual amongst races possessive of what he termed 'inborn superiority', but expected when traditional social and economic orders were threatened by a future devoid of past securities.²⁴ Pearson had identified the English *fin de siècle* anxiety, an intense fatalism coursing through an associated nostalgic longing for a simple, rural past existence. The attendant celebration of a 'rural species' was not a new cultural direction. Gareth Stedman-Jones believes the inherent superiority of rural dwellers had been recognised, at least within London, in the eighteenth century, a period when England was still overwhelmingly rural.²⁵ Increasingly, agricultural depression was conceived, initially by a wide range of writers from within the farming community and progressively from general social critics and historians such as R.C.K. Ensor and G.K. Chesterton, of depriving the nation of true racial archetypes, a stance awarded spurious legitimacy through Physical Deterioration Committee concerns over the failing condition of national 'reservoirs of strength', namely rural population distress.²⁶

The issues of racial degeneration and depression in agriculture perfectly highlight the tensions and contradictions between scripting a folklore-myth of physical and moral vigour endemic to those engaged in agriculture and a functional assertion of farming pre-eminence. In relation to Condition of Rural England literature, this process involved displaying peasant myths within a more 'truthful' inscription, tailoring 'facts', however, to appeal to romantic fantasies the general public embraced as 'real England'. The most obvious example of this fusion of myth and actuality is through the simultaneous celebration and fear for the soldier-farmer racial archetype. This association between militarism and husbandry confirmed agrarian depression had evolved into a broader, national symbol of social upheaval spawned from the conflict between the old order and a new industrial capitalist economic regime as debate surrounding farm failure was hastily manipulated into a dialogue of social degeneracy. The elevation of the rural resident as a superior racial expression, was founded upon a Pastoral characterisation of an English racial archetype and a shift in degeneracy debates at the end of the nineteenth-century from ethnic groups to social groups as a means of assessing the allegedly deteriorating human condition.²⁷ Within a reactionary position, the ideal *Englishman* was formed as a composite image of perceived attributes which had made Britain powerful and an apparent civilising force, *nonpareil*. Such idiosyncrasies included strength, diligence and moral righteousness and were embodied in the ethereal form of the yeoman or with more progressive or Socialistic conceptualisations, a vaguely defined collection of farmers and labourers.

In addition to understanding the impression of farming distress upon the national psyche, further interest in farm failure and the composition of rural racial stocks resides in a comprehension of national needs for re-assurance from a mythical ethnic figure while concurrently removing this icon of English nationhood further from its closest actual personification, the rustic labourer.²⁸ The favourable critique of the peasant farmer proved to be remarkably enduring, with an enormous upsurge in popularity at precisely the moment when the contemporary equivalent to this historically-rooted ideal figure was prised from the soil. In celebrating the agricultural-type, both progressive and reactionary visions appealed to rural racial purity, untouched by cosmopolitan influences. Anxieties over physical decay *in situ* acknowledged the irrecoverable destruction of a biological lineage of even minds in sound enduring bodies. Increasingly science was employed, as David Livingstone detects in a later racial geography movement, as a legitimating tool for frequently hysterical ethnic inquests.²⁹ This scientific language coupled with imprecise readings of Darwinist thinking infiltrated a range of general literature, not least the Condition of Rural England texts.

Urban issues and 'outcast London' were promoted at the expense of investigating rural apprehensions.³⁰ Percy Roxby, Professor of Geography at

Liverpool University warned half a century of the pre-dominance of urban issues had to be balanced with incisive economic and social study of rural issues, rather than purely 'physical and aesthetical' comment.³¹ What Ruralist writers like Haggard, Green and Martin established was recognition of rural degeneration *in situ* as an important issue equal to urban decay. Adopting the idea that rural people represented the racial backbone of the nation, rural degeneracy popularly demanded greater urgency than the urban problem, for as Charles Masterman outlined, this residue group made up from old men, the inert, the unenterprising and 'intellectually feeble', constituted a sick heart to sustain the English character.³²

6.3.2 Environmental Determinism, Biological Inheritance and the Terminological Confusion

Stedman-Jones speculated that a reading of moral inadequacy from the 'deleterious influences of the urban' milieu revealed a Victorian acceptance of environmental determinism.³³ By adopting an identical deterministic ethos in celebrating a rural existence, poets, writers, Ruralists such as Haggard, Green and anyone else who cared to comment in favour of the countryside, reinforced environmental theory. Yet this popular affirmation uncovers a critical flaw in any argument that venerated the countryside as a superior breeding ground. In regard to rural England, degeneracy arguments evolved from extensive outmigration. The fear represented in part, therefore, a *biological* notion which contended a constricted gene pool increasingly dominated by the less-desirables of rural society would fail to reproduce the model rural species. An *environmental* argument by definition contended that despite short-term decay, the benefits of country living would ultimately restore the rural race to its alleged superior condition. 'Miles', a pseudonym for one of the most famous observers of physical deterioration, Major-General Sir Frederick Maurice, in an essay entitled 'Where to get Men' affirmed the regenerative qualities of environment in suggesting a continued supply of fit and hearty young men for military purposes required the passing of a number of years, inferring the 'development of a healthy population out of an unhealthy one...[was]...a slow process'.³⁴

The confusion between biological lineage with the influence of environment and milieu is evident as a major theoretical inconsistency amongst writers who affirmed the qualities of the peasant or the soldier-farmer *nurtured within* their country existence, yet simultaneously maintained the *inheritance* of characteristics developed solely from superior biological breeding in subsequent fears for rural racial succession. Small holding schemes and similar methods to return prosperity to the soil through re-inventing the yeoman, promoted spiritual and physical benefits which were obtainable through securing individual labour upon the soil, thus subscribing to environmental determinist arguments. But associated allegations that a *laissez faire*

attitude towards current farming practices failed to stem outmigration, thus leaving an enfeebled residue of workers unsuitable for the future production of the rural racial archetype, were biological in their prediction of racial deterioration through a depreciated inheritance, because they did not allow for the regenerative qualities of the country environment to work on this weakened remnant population.³⁵ Land reformers believed the revered qualities of the rural worker were gained through the working of the soil, by definition environmental factors. Yet expressed fears of potential long-term degeneracy suggested they believed strength and moral vigour were also genetically inherited traits. Reformists advocated a reconstruction of the rural milieu to *safeguard* the racial archetype, yet their vision of Englishness was inspired by a nostalgic remembrance of the medieval peasant. In other words, the imaginary realm was confused with physical reality.

To argue the future heart of the English race was at stake created an unwanted diversion, fashioning a cultural crisis to accompany economic misfortune which was both burdensome and unnecessary. In reality opportunities for proficient farm labourers were actively rejected rather than disappearing outright.³⁶ This inability of farmers to fill labouring posts lay less with a scarcity of quality labour and more upon unacceptably low wage levels which drove the young into the towns, a problem manufactured by the collective incapability of village life to adjust to the new economic and social order.³⁷ Biological and environmental determinism were not prominent rural issues until their intellectual vogue inevitably indoctrinated agrarian literature. Once again, the symptoms, namely racial decay, received the greatest attention while the causes, the maladministration of farming, were quietly passed over. In short, predictions of a biological crisis contradicted the life-affirming qualities of the country environment so readily celebrated. Arguments that the residue work force was physically weaker, an issue of physiology rather than inheritance, were valid, if not proven accurate. The idea that the future lifeblood of the race was at stake, blatantly exacerbated the situation by imposing unsubstantiated concepts, reflecting the contrary nature of racial pseudo-science which blended evolutionary theory with the cultural mindset of the period.³⁸

A sense of irrelevancy existed in both biological and environmental thinking and their application to the agricultural crisis, because neither offered rational analysis of the financial question and likewise contributed little to debates to resolve the farming *impasse*. This unification of culture and natural sciences has been noted by a number of historians. Daniel Pick states that 'Darwinism was undoubtedly social, inextricably enmeshed in the language, politics and culture of [the] past'.³⁹ Similarly, both Stedman-Jones and Sander Gilman propose that the idea of degeneracy, of which Darwinism informed, proved popular because it combined middle class angst (a 'complex of...beliefs' that included agricultural depression, population relocation in

space, labour unrest, protectionism and global competitiveness) with scientific theory, conveniently at a period of social transformation.⁴⁰ The theory fitted perfectly a sense of irrevocable loss which underlay English national insecurity as the century ended. As W.R. Inge, the Dean of St. Pauls was to later state, 'political anthropology is no genuine racial science. Race and nationality are catchwords for which rulers find that their subjects are willing fight'.⁴¹

6.3.3 The Loss of the Racial Archetype

Despite theoretical inconsistencies, degeneracy theories continued to concentrate on English racial survival and the preservation of a "superior" archetype. General Sir Frederick Maurice set the tone by proposing to the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration that 'the peril was enormous' should the ethnic model recede further.⁴² Reasons for such apprehension lay in an uncertainty towards the future. Most obviously, the defence of England over and above issues of industrial productivity proved the biggest neurosis, with the race question often couched in militaristic terms.⁴³ William Hill-Climo impressively illustrates the point when he attacks British indifference to 'health of the nation' debates in comparison with other European countries, where universal military service allowed the creation of a physical standard which could usefully chart the development of male youths, thus providing the evidence needed to co-ordinate affirmative action.⁴⁴

The need for a superior specimen resided in the maintenance of British security and continuation of overseas interests. The implications of degeneracy were enormous. 'It is no use having an empire without an imperial race' proclaimed George Shee.⁴⁵ 'Mrs Close', a traveller and social observer reported that over her forty years of touring, she had noted the population of England, and rural children in particular, deteriorating both mentally and bodily.⁴⁶ Overwhelmingly, writers on the issue blamed the shift in population towards an urban majority. Shee, once more, was explicit in his indictment of urban living for 'injuriously affecting the physique of the nation', believing that the absence of a similar continental fear resided in favourable comparisons in terms of the percentage of urban dwellers within state populations as a whole. So for example France and Germany, critically Britain's two most powerful European rivals possessed beneficial proportions of 25% and 36% urban respectively. In England the figure for urban residency was 77%.⁴⁷ By denigrating the urban experience, the countryside was alternatively celebrated as a source of nationhood. Haggard's sentiment is typical when he reiterates that 'the land is still the true mother of the race, which were it not for the same land, would soon dwindle into littleness'.⁴⁸ The underlying poetic symbolism of fertility and the land was converted into 'real' life-giving forces which separated the rural dweller from the urban masses.

6.4 *The Soldier-Farmer Archetype and Physical Deterioration*

The urgency of the *rural* degeneracy debate emerged from two events. Firstly, as alluded to, a numerical decline in the population and secondly, the absence of a suitable response to depression, suggesting a further deterioration of circumstances before eventual resolution.⁴⁹ Appropriately employing the medico-physiological imagery that infused degeneracy discourses with its notion of the countryside as the heart of England and the farming community representative of the ethnic life-blood, 'Persimmon' hinted that the racial crisis as applied to a rural context was more complex than a simple numerical question when he complained that

*The British farmer claims the appellation of being the back-bone of old England. The back-bone at the present time is suffering from a spinal affection, which requires the most strenuous and careful treatment.*⁵⁰

His portrayal of the farmer as severely weakened was quite clearly a metaphor for the ageing and unfit labour supply from which the farmer increasingly relied upon. To help define the issue of rural racial decay and its relationship with agrarian depression (the 'spinal affection'), requires an understanding of the qualities that inspired a veneration of the rustic worker; ascertaining the exact nature of the fear that accompanied rural migration townward, and secondly, comprehending the implications for both farming and Britain of maintaining an inferior residue labour force following the rural exodus.

6.4.1 The Reverential Qualities of Rural Life

The poetic license employed in reverence of rustic labour was a familiar literary device masquerading, in Victorian times, as a metaphor for various moral and spiritual codes.⁵¹ Thus we find repeated reference to the lustiness and stamina of the rural sons, the iconology of which is undoubtedly masculine, alluding both to the individual and collective rural race. Quite clearly it is the physical nature of work undertaken and an occupation of the soil that is celebrated. Yet as previously intimated, the labourer and farmer (along with their peasant and yeoman ancestors) were equally endorsed as the English racial life-blood, setting the rural worker apart from the rest of society as an ethnically distinct symbol of a past English race rather than an adulterated remnant. The rural labourer mythically possessed the purest strain of Englishness. The urban runt, was only English because he resided within the territorial space that was England. Such abstractions were not restricted to verse and more literary prose. 'To British agriculture', wrote James Long, the prominent farming expert, 'we owe those thews and sinews, those traits of endurance, perseverance, and industry, and that nobility of character which have enabled her sons to colonise in every continent and to lead in the van of civilization'.⁵² Proclaiming the 'health' of the nation to be as

important as the 'wealth', rural residents and the space they occupied performed as signifiers for strength and replenishment.⁵³

Intellectual boundaries between biological inheritance and environmental shaping were continually blurred. The resultant hybrid theory suggested rural dwellers were physically superior to their urban counterparts, enhanced by occupation and milieu. In accordance with earlier miasmatic theory, environmental factors embraced the healthiness of outdoor work. The decrepit rustic cottage was celebrated, somewhat facetiously, because it exposed the resident to the re-energizing country air.

*So far as the evidence has come before one, it is very often the case that the occupant of an old half-tumbled down cottage, even the Irishman's with a pig in it which has any quantity of holes, lives in a more healthy oxygen than in one of the most perfectly built homes, where the window is never open.*⁵⁴

Within the countryside, environmental determinism was readily associated with an occupational component in influencing the physical and psychological make-up of a person, chiefly because the rural milieu had been overwhelmingly shaped by one pursuit, agriculture. Those commentators, who combined environmental factors with biological theory, justified their ideas by suggesting the physical and moral characteristics of the rural race were erased within the second or third generation born into urban life, a deleterious affect of environment that gradually fought against the human condition.⁵⁵ Haggard seized on the work of urban social observers and the conclusions of Charles Pearson to stress the real affects of the rural exodus would take a number of years to actualise, firmly believing the 'stamina of the race will hold out...for one generation or two', though he recognized the apparent inevitability of an overall diminution in terms of the health and physique of the nation as rural folk represented a reduced proportion of the population.⁵⁶

For those who believed in the exceptional biological inheritance of the rural worker, evidence of cherished qualities, of patience and endeavour, came no clearer than in the transposition of labour from countryside to city. 'The country,' wrote Charles Booth, 'whatever those who are left behind may be, does send the finest men to the towns'.⁵⁷ This support of biologism was not, as Gareth Stedman-Jones testifies, restricted to less-conventional thinkers but had permeated aspects of middle-class thought, being given ideological authority by such figures as Booth and G.B Longstaff amongst others.⁵⁸ Retaining physical strength and the vigorous country work ethic, racial theory contended the farming population invariably supplied the best labour for city-based industries, resistant across one generation to urban squalor. The desirability for rural labour amongst urban employees, Stedman-Jones records, created resentment amid vast pools of unskilled urban labour as vacant jobs were filled by rustic migrants.⁵⁹ The superior calibre of the rural labourer achieved even greater credence following the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Noting

how the 'splendid men' of the countryside increasingly dominated employment opportunities in steel mills, blast furnaces and iron foundries, because of a capacity to work efficiently and with incomparable endurance, one witness was moved to report, '...the vast majority of these workers are country *bred* and have grown to maturity in farm or outdoor work'.⁶⁰

In addition to displaying tacit recognition of biologism, the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration Final Report offered respectable acceptance that employment conditions similarly determined physique. In rural areas environment and occupation were related through agriculture.⁶¹ Masculine labour commanded higher wage levels, forcing the weakest into poorly paid jobs that presented little opportunity for physical development. The Final Report recorded 'the poorest in physique are those met with in the lowest paid and unskilled textile operations', that is the worst urban-based work.⁶² Tangible evidence of a physically pre-eminent rural worker was manifest in the farm labourer removed from his domicile environment by army recruitment. English farms were alleged to offer a better standard of recruit, in both physical terms and a commitment to fight. Thomas D. Savill, a prominent physician as well as Vice-President and Co-Founder of the British College of Physical Education collated statistical evidence to support such claims.⁶³ Psycho-social characteristics such as the disciplined mind of the rural worker, an exemplary military characteristic, contrasted sharply in its puritanism with the apparent libertarianism of urban dwellers, a factor that rendered farmers and farm workers particularly attractive and reliable candidates for military service.⁶⁴ The endurance associated with agrarian moil cultivated restraint, a useful trait in war.⁶⁵ Rural-bred recruits dominated the Footguards and heavy cavalry, regiments dependent on physical strength. In less renowned regiments, such as the Hussars, urban soldiers overwhelmingly constituted the ranks.⁶⁶

For whatever reasons, be they occupational or hereditary, contemporary military research revealed rural workers possessed a healthier physique. Anthropometric data had uncovered a variance in stature of up to five inches in children and three inches in adults dependent on rural or urban residency.⁶⁷ Walter Gattie offered some of the most conclusive evidence in support of a superior rural physique. Employing data extracted from recruiting statistics despite inherent biases associated with this type of evidence he established the 'miscellaneous outdoor' occupational class achieved greater average figures for both stature and weight at 5 feet 7.56 inches and 142.11 pounds respectively. In reality the difference in size was marginal between outdoor classes and miscellaneous indoor classes, with less than one inch variance in height and a negligible four pounds in weight between the most and least sizeable class of workers. Thus any statistically proven relationship represented the merest of minimal affects.

Occupations	Number of Men Examined	Average Stature		Average Weight lbs
		feet	inches	
Misc. Outdoor	174	5	7.56	142
Clerk/Shopman, etc	242	5	7.28	136
Masons, etc	100	5	7.13	139
Labourers	834	5	7.11	140
Ironworkers	209	5	7.11	140
Woodworkers	200	5	7.08	137
Bakers	34	5	6.91	142
Miners	67	5	6.91	138
Tailor, Shoemakers	135	5	6.89	134
Misc. Indoor	335	5	6.77	132
Grooms	101	5	6.57	138

Table 6: Recruitment Statistics For England and Scotland From 1890

Based Upon Occupation

Figures extracted from W.M. Gattie, *The Physique of European Armies Fortnightly*

Review 47 (new series) (1890), 566-585

6.4.2 The Implications of the Declining Soldier-Farmer Ideal

Rider Haggard, famously exposed the irony of a mythical superior rural race, alerting the nation to the contemporary degradation of the sturdiest class in *Rural England*. The residual labourer no longer symbolised cardinal virtues of Englishness, a perspective that strictly conformed to biological arguments regarding the potentiality of an inferior genetic inheritance. In his own words the remaining rural labourforce was

*...largely furnished...from the ranks of elderly and old men who at their time of life can turn to nothing else, or by those for some reason or another, such as mental weakness are unfit to do anything else.*⁶⁸

The exodus of 'stronger types' shaped the investigative remit of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Subjective or plain anecdotal evidence was adorned with the language of hard science to add gravitas. For instance, George Haynes Fosbroke, Chief Medical Officer of Health to Worcestershire County Council noted that despite an improved diet and better wages, the decay in physique had been rapid, ultimately influencing the capacity to execute hard labour.⁶⁹

*Thirty years ago it was the commonest thing for a labourer to carry two and a quarter cwt. of corn up a ladder; now you very seldom see it...generally the farmers say that the men are of a weaker type altogether.*⁷⁰

However, the issue of rural diet proved highly contradictory. Fosbroke may have felt rural workers consumed healthier food, but others disagreed.⁷¹ 'Mrs Close' alternatively felt rural labourers ate deficiently and this in association with the lack of a disposable income to buy better food caused by the depression contributed to the declining physique of the rural race. She recalled from her stay in Bracestead, Kent that boiled turnips constituted the main part of dinner and supper each day every week. Close claimed boiled turnips were about 80% water, and though turnips were not 'unwholesome', they were less-healthy than over British vegetables.⁷² She believed a spatiality existed to deficient diet, with southern labourers suffering greater undernourishment than their northern counterparts. 'The more remote the province is from London, the better the food - that is undoubted'.⁷³ Apart from poverty, her feeling was that traditional cooking practices were being abandoned. Contentiously she linked this decline in southern cooking to 'cottager's wives' spending greater effort in visiting London for theatre entertainment.⁷⁴ Figures from 1902 relating to the physical condition of candidates for enlistment reinforced claims that a defective rural diet contributed to rejections from the army on physical grounds. For example, 16.1% of 'Labourers, Husbandmen and servants enrolled at urban recruitment centres were rejected because of defective teeth. This ranked equally with 'under chest measurement'. Interestingly, the number of rejections based on teeth rose from 792 in 1901 to 1,311 in 1902.⁷⁵ Defective teeth were linked directly to poor diet.⁷⁶ 'Miles' went a stage further and implicated the selling of goods to town. The rural population

were left with inferior quality foodstuffs unable to fetch a profitable price if sold in urban markets. Amongst the growing number of rejections from potential rural recruits to the British army, the greatest problem appears to have been defective digestion caused by an inability to masticate food effectively because of bad teeth. Bad teeth were the ironic result of a lack of milk in rural infant diets, because milk had been sold to market.⁷⁷

But diet was a national problem, and not just a rural concern, though obviously because of the mythologised rural 'reservoirs of strength', the country problem appeared more pressing. Tallerman noted that in comparison with foreigners, the British did not eat even remotely similar levels of fruit and vegetables. The paucity of a healthy diet was nothing less than a 'national calamity'.⁷⁸ Sir John Gorst made the point even more explicitly, believing that 'where a Frenchwoman would make an excellent dinner, an Englishwoman would almost starve'. The urgency of the dietary problem is emphasised in the Final Report on Physical Training (Scotland) (1902), concluding that 'an affinity exists between conditions of nutrition and health of body and mind, on the one hand, and measurements of height, weight and girth on the other'.⁷⁹ Ultimately, as long as agricultural depression persisted, poverty would continue to enforce the consumption of cheap and unhealthy food, and necessitate the sale of all but the most imperfect foodstuff to market.

Lower quality of farm labour could only have served to heighten the sense of farm failure and an inability to resolve the farming crisis. Medical experts testified to an increasingly inferior rural breeding process following the population exodus. Dr E.S. Passmore of the Croydon Mental Hospital went further and fabricated direct physiological links with agrarian fortunes.⁸⁰ For Ernest Jones of the Brecon and Radnor Asylum at Talgarth, the logical upshot of rural migration could only be racial descent.

...in rural districts all the best men and women go to the towns and leave the mentally dull to marry and intermarry and 'breed dullards and imbeciles worse than themselves'.⁸¹

To compound a breakdown in racial replenishment, remaining 'inferior types' were supplemented by urban outmigration of those marginalised within the city environment by the influx of what the Physical Deterioration Committee termed 'more vigorous elements', namely rural migrants.⁸² Whether the reverse migration of urban residents to the countryside was partly responsible for perceived decline in labour quality remains unknown. It is likely, however, that the effects were minimal. Environmental theorists would not have perceived the influx of city-types as a long term problem, due to the regenerative powers of the countryside. For others, like Fosbroke, the continued falling off of physique in rural areas remained a purely biological problem, exacerbated by urban out-migration.

The question of rural racial decay through urban migration into the countryside was firmly posited within a wider patriotic debate. Firstly, the presence of 'non-indigenous' elements undermined the purity of rural biological lineages and disrupted a moral balance in the nurturing process that enabled the countryside to offer peerless workers, premium soldiers and reliable labourers. Secondly, the reverse migration progress was most conspicuous within the culturally defined national homeland, the south-east of England, reflecting movement out from London. 'Evidence given before the Royal Commission on Physical Training (Scotland) seemed to suggest that the physique of the population in certain of the Home Counties had suffered by the outflow of debilitated types' concluded the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration Final Report section entitled 'Depletion of Rural Districts By the Exodus of the Best Types'.⁸³ J. Tweedy suggested to the Committee that 'There is a current of the better and more adventurous people into the towns, and also a smaller reverse current of the feebler and less strong and fit, who are driven back to the land again.'⁸⁴ Though the committee was not wholly convinced by Tweedy's evidence, the final report does note rural areas were losing on two counts. Primarily, the best workers were removed to either urban occupations or recruitment into the army and secondly, the countryside acquired a quasi-status as an asylum of for townspeople. Almeric W. FitzRoy, the chairman raised the fear in a question to Dr Arthur Shadwell, inquiring if 'the evil [degeneracy] may be...caused in both ways?'⁸⁵

6.5 The Army Recruitment Problem and the Soldier-Farmer

The numerical decline in the rural labourforce arose at a critical moment. With a very public concern over the increasing difficulty of the army to recruit physically able soldiers and a fear of imperial overstretch typified by 70,000 men being stationed in India alone, a potential diminution of rural supplies of fit, healthy, disciplined trainees compounded the perceived threat.⁸⁶ Walter Gattie justified a melodramatic attack on the complacency perpetuating nation physical decline recorded by the British army by referring to the words of Lord Bacon, '...the principle part of greatness in any state, is to have a race of military men'.⁸⁷ A willingness to fight, as Grainger has recently asserted, represented one of the most lucid expressions of patriotic loyalty to the nation.⁸⁸ Traditionally, this source of militia had been the farms of Britain, but as Brian Bond testifies, 'the drift to the towns diminished the traditional supply of brawny, illiterate rustics'.⁸⁹ Similarly, Maurice, in giving evidence to the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration claimed the yeoman had 'formed the bulk of the army in earlier days'.⁹⁰

The origins of the Yeomanry and direct recruitment from agriculture are of interest to us at this juncture. The idea of offering up hearty rustic labourers for

military service was first proposed by Arthur Young following his famous tour of France.⁹¹ Young's idea was straightforward.

*A regiment of a thousand cavalry in every county of moderate extent just disciplined enough to obey orders and keep their ranks, might be enrolled and assembled in companies three days in every year, and in regiments once in seven, at a very moderate expense to the public.*⁹²

He noted the tendency amongst European nations was to form a militia based upon the 'dregs of the people', thereby failing to guarantee a stable method of security. By establishing a yeoman regiment for protection against insurrection at home, Britain could avoid the same fate as had befallen revolutionary France. Drawing upon a 'militia of property' comprised of tenant farmers and small landowners, perhaps with the local patrician classes acting as officers, protected established land rights through organised self-interest and the *laissez faire* approach to farming, that according to landlordist histories of agriculture had served farming so well. Young was convinced that such an idea would prove palatable to the army of Britain.⁹³ Symbolically, the Yeomanry would also re-assert the power of the *ancien regime*. The soldier-farmer offered security for the three-tiered social order overwhelmed in France.⁹⁴ However, the number of service men declined throughout the nineteenth-century.⁹⁵ Edward Spiers suggests that in the first half of the century alone, Yeomanry volunteers fell from 17,818 in 1817 to approximately 14,000 by 1838. However, Spiers also records that a 'substantial' number of Yeomanry soldiers made up the 109,000 volunteers that fought in the Boer War at the end of the nineteenth-century.⁹⁶ But the withering of rural human resources forced unprecedented reliance on urban recruits, with obvious implications for army fitness and fighting capacity. To compound the problem, rural inhabitants that relocated in towns did so with injurious effect to their health.⁹⁷ The predominance of urban recruits was inevitable given the British population was now overwhelmingly urban-based and increasingly urban-born.⁹⁸ The geographical shift in recruitment patterns from the countryside contrived a whole new problem with regard to physique and manpower, which in comparison with overseas armies were perceived to have created a serious challenge to British military efficiency.

Two contemporary contributions to a theory of declining physique were Walter Gattie's essay on 'The Physique of European Armies' and a brace of papers plus evidence presented before the Physical Deterioration Committee by Major-General Sir Frederick Maurice, Professor of Military Art and History at the Army Staff College, Camberley. Gattie was one of the first critics to express concern over physical prowess when he published a survey of the physique of European armies validating the apprehensions of British recruiting officers. 'It is somewhat disquieting to hear the complaints frequently made by English officers' he wrote, 'of the deterioration in the physique of the army owing to the difficulty in obtaining suitable recruits'.⁹⁹ Maurice,

more controversially, asserted three in every five recruits were unsuitable for army service.¹⁰⁰ Uncertain of whether this represented racial regression, Maurice did propose the 'peril was enormous'.¹⁰¹ The numbers unable to pass the medical examination were distended further from a series of physical breakdowns occurring during the first months of fitness training. Maurice identified heart weaknesses, pneumatic troubles and rheumatism as causal factors.¹⁰² Statistical evidence to support these claims was abundant. The popular indicator of manifest deterioration was stature, a method of assessment favoured by the Anthropometric Committee of the British Association.¹⁰³ For Gattie, declining stature was indicative of a degeneracy 'not of the English army but of the English race'.¹⁰⁴ Both Gattie and later George F. Shee, based their assumptions on figures that appeared to demonstrate a dramatic reduction in the typical height of recruits since the middle of the nineteenth-century, with Shee's data suggesting a marked diminution after 1890.¹⁰⁵ Table 8 illustrates a breakdown of Gattie's findings for the British army intake. The table conclusively revealed that by 1887, over half the recruits were under five foot six inches, formerly the minimum height restriction.¹⁰⁶ Explanations were apparently elementary. Firstly, the army wage no longer attracted the more physically able recruits, who commanded a choice of industrial jobs offering better pay. Secondly, Gattie subscribed to the environmental ethic of a superior rural milieu when he blamed the out-migration of many rural residents that '...rate among the best of their class in point of physique', although his reasoning was not easily reconciled with a shared belief in the wider *biological* degeneracy of the English race, supported by a deficient underclass. Shee's evidence, published thirteen years later did prove less alarming. In 1890 the average height of the recruit was five feet eight inches, a figure which contradicted Gattie's assertion from that year. Figures also revealed by Shee on the proportion of men in the army under five feet five inches aligned themselves even less readily. In 1889, 106 men per 1,000 were five feet five inches or less and not the 528 per 1,000 under five feet six inches alleged by Gattie. In nine years this proportion had reached 132 per 1,000 soldiers.¹⁰⁷ Gattie conceded that lower stature was not indicative of an inability to fight, but the *perceived* risk to security motivated the publication of the paper.¹⁰⁸

Military implications of racial degeneracy were not new nor restricted to Britain. An identical debate had raged in France prior to the Franco-German war. The issue of patriotism informed debates, whether French or British. John Haughton issued an extreme warning that a failure to halt degeneration in combination with apathetic attitudes towards the issue of rural depopulation, would render the nation dependent on foreign mercenaries that could never fight with the patriotic zeal of British soldiers.¹⁰⁹ A comparison with continental armies revealed a general tendency in the rest of Europe towards physical improvement. Indeed, comparisons with similar figures produced by the German army and collated by George Shee proved

YEAR	<5' 6"	5'6"-5'7"	5'7"-5'8"	5'8"-5'9"	5'9"-5'10"	5'10"-5'11"	Over 5'11"
1845	105	473	204	111	74	16	17
1887	528	163	126	88	53	22	20

Table 7: Different Heights Enrolled into the British Army in 1845 and 1887.

Source: W.M. Gattie, *The Physique of European Armies Fortnightly Review* 47 (new series) (1890) 566-585.

unpalatable.¹¹⁰ Despite environmental improvements, the British recruit in 1900 was over an inch shorter than the German recruit in 1877. However, the most disturbing statistic lay in the average weight. Quoting 1877 data produced by Dr Fetzner who had suggested no recruit to the German army should weigh less than 9 stone 6.15 pounds, a figure that excluded 61.4 % of the British army of 1898, the typical weight of the German recruit was 10 stone 3.3 pounds.

6.5.1 Solutions to Degeneracy and the Failing Army Recruit

One solution to degeneracy as detected in army recruitment statistics advocated compulsory military service, a scheme favoured by Shee in his capacity as secretary to the National Service League, an organisation forged to promote conscription.¹¹¹ Shee and others were motivated by believing the whole nation had to attain a level of fitness suitable for fighting. The numerical decline in employment in outdoor occupations it was alleged, contributed to a diminution in physical capacity. Fosbroke similarly asserted the need for physical training of adolescent boys in rural areas, encouraging participation in football and cricket, as an attempt to raise basic fitness levels. The attainment of a physical ideal presented impossible and unworkable targets not least because of the arbitrariness of a concept such as 'fitness'. Despite the efforts of the Anthropometric Committee of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, no English racial physical standard had been defined.¹¹² Undaunted by theoretical inconsistency, attention focused on introducing physical training along the lines of Britain's continental rivals as a means of raising standards and assessing bodily development.¹¹³ However, Maurice questioned the usefulness of physical training, identifying the problem as one of racial succession in wholly inappropriate environmental surroundings of poverty and moral decay, circumstances training could only partially overcome.¹¹⁴ The futility of the exercise was evident in his own figures that only two in five made the grade as soldiers.

...if the great body of the nation itself is decaying in health and physical vigour, no increased inducements to enlist, whether in the form of compulsion or of higher pay or other advantages can adequately compensate the evil.¹¹⁵

Despite expressing pessimism towards the effectiveness of a pro-active educational approach, Maurice had earlier, writing as 'Miles', added his support to a scheme of national physical training to raise standards. His revised argument was, however, that by restricting training to the better class of recruits who passed the physical examinations to join up, made them 'less representative' of the nation they fought for. Therefore, universal training overcame an increasingly insurmountable disparity between fit soldiers and civilians.¹¹⁶ Instead, Maurice felt a more fruitful proposition would be determined if barriers to minimum physical attainment, such as poverty, could be removed.¹¹⁷ Theoretically, this assertion offered tacit acceptance of the

tendency identified by Cunningham that racial groups reverted back to a 'normal' state, alternatively, a mean physical standard, though this process was undermined by environmental and occupational factors, such as poverty and insanitary living.

6.5.2 The Fallacies Within the Statistics of Degeneration

As Maurice notes, statistics reflecting deterioration were difficult to verify, primarily due to a series of data inaccuracies. Maurice admitted his assertion that only two in five recruits were capable of offering the requisite physical prowess for military life did not necessarily testify to an inability of the nation as a whole to offer a fighting capability. From an historical perspective, the ensuing analysis discloses late-Victorian insecurity.¹¹⁸ Deterioration 'facts' were generated to vindicate wild assumptions, typically concealing a moralist undercurrent rather than cultivating scientific inquest. The enduring popularity of the soldier-farmer racial archetype and the looming threat of agricultural depression merely served to muddy the waters. If, as this ensuing section suggests, statistics were exaggerated or lacking in any rational scientific basis, one must conclude the relevancy of agricultural depression in any physical deterioration debate was probably overplayed, or at least misconstrued. However, this does not detract from the involvement of degeneracy theory in the public profile of depression. Official commissions such as the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration recognised the importance of depression without distancing themselves from the suspect biologism that resulted from the depression-induced rural exodus.

Unlike other European countries where compulsory military service was accompanied by documentation, Britain lacked a cohesive collection of detailed anthropometrical statistics.¹¹⁹ Three discrepancies arise from this statistical muddle that cast serious doubt on the validity of racial decay claims derived from army recruitment data. Firstly, figures extrapolated in demonstration of national physical deterioration were based solely on highly selective samples of numbers who wanted to join the army. D.J. Cunningham ascribed this pattern to a direct link with economic circumstances. 'When trade is good and employment plentiful, it is only from the lowest stratum of the people that the army receives its supply of men'.¹²⁰ Secondly, the statistical evidence hid the extreme youth of many enrolees, the implication being that stature and weight would increase with age especially under military guidance. Finally, the enumeration system obscured the considerable overhaul of recruiting procedures following the Cardwell reforms. The response to the new recruitment drive aimed at various occupational groups remained undetected. By examining these statistical inconsistencies, a conclusion is attainable that overthrows entrenched cultural codings attached to the rural racial archetype, especially as a soldier.

The assumption that the army received the best potential recruits, despite the considerable number of rejections, was a flaw critical in Maurice's logic. The idea contradicted Cunningham's economic determinant to social groups that applied to join the army.¹²¹ Aligned with this with statistical evidence Spiers produced recently on declining numbers enlisting into the Yeomanry, and a reluctance amongst suitable candidates to commit to army life is disclosed. The Final Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration referred to admissions by both the Director-General and Inspector-General for recruiting that 'the real lesson' of the statistics was the fallibility of unsuccessful enrolling methods rather than substantive evidence of physical degradation.¹²² Comparisons between Gattie's investigation into the average measurements of labourers from various occupations with his survey of recruits demonstrated that the army contained soldiers with a typical stature below most other physical occupations. The average height for farm labourers was 5 feet 7.56 inches. Approximately three quarters of all army recruits were beneath this standard. Even the average height for grooms and stable-hands, the least sizeable occupational classes examined, recorded a greater stature than half the army enrollees of 1887. The most significant disclosure on army recruitment was an acceptance that wages were insufficient to enlist men apart from the most despairing of the urban poor. Furthermore, pre-industrial conditions in the army, as Anne Summers notes, and a notorious reputation as a source of vice and drinking discouraged many, particularly from formerly secure rural occupations from joining up.¹²³ Thus, the possibility of usefully recruiting rural migrants for the benefit of the nation was lost, as the lure of better paid jobs in the city proved too great to attract the disaffected labourer.¹²⁴

Changes in recruitment patterns, particularly in the attraction of the urban youth, further distorted and thereby mythologised stature data. In comparison with European rivals, the low recruitment age compelled the British army to enlist boys some way short of their full adult height. Brian Bond's historical reading of the ultimately unsuccessful Cardwell reforms, undertaken to enlist a higher class of recruit through offering short-term service, forced the army, he contends, to rely on undersized and increasingly youthful soldiers. Perhaps as high as 80% of home battalions were unavailable for drafting because of juvenility. Crucial to any interpretation of Gattie's stature table (Table 8) revealing the increased proportion of men under five feet six inches enlisting, was a recognition that the figures included soldiers who had yet to attain full growth. However, Gattie doubted the probability of producing corroborative data proving simultaneous reductions in the average age of the modern soldier.¹²⁵

Thirdly, comparisons with Europe did not always prove unfavourable, though a palpable sense of pessimism tended to obscure this fact. For example, Britain had maintained stringent height restrictions over a longer period than other continental

armies, a fact deeply submerged within the fatalism of the age.¹²⁶ Disparities between various European recruitment figures were equally attributable to administrative techniques and political expediency as much as the physical characteristics they reflected. Indeed, Eichholz reported to the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration that the British army should draw satisfaction from a 40% pass rate at the medical examination stage. A comparable figure of 84% for the German army could equally suggest that the physical requirements for entry may well have been less exacting.

The compilation of weight and stature measurements sometimes offered evidence contrary to the degeneracy fear. Figures relating to physical stamina subsequent to the South African War revealed a visible improvement in recruits offered for war service. In 1896 42% of men volunteering for military service were rejected on medical grounds. By 1900 this figure dropped quite significantly to 28%. Maurice, writing as "Miles", accepted this improvement was 'real', his explanations reducible to two categories, temporary factors and permanent conditions. Transient explanations contended that war generated patriotic interest amongst those averse to normal army recruitment, thus raising standards by enlisting men otherwise content on moving into urban based occupations or remaining in farming. A more permanent cause was derived from a simple administrative change that forced recruiting officers to curb the selection of men that were likely to fail the medical examination by army doctors.¹²⁷ The underlying assumption was, however, that the army was desperate to fill the ranks during war time.

The reliance on military statistics to make claims in regard to national physique revealed the lack of any scientific structure to data collection. Unfortunately, army figures contained distortions precipitated by numerous biases built into the collation of evidence, such as the unrepresentative nature of enlistees for military service and a subsequent reading of the data susceptible to sociological anxiety. The principal conclusions reached by Maurice and Shee proved highly contentious, a fact observed in the final report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Firstly, evidence presented by the Director-General of army recruitment did not readily testify to the existence of physical deterioration. Secondly, 'no sufficient material [statistical or otherwise]' was available to offer definitive proof of national degeneration. Finally, investigations into the classes that supplied contemporary recruits for the army proved misleading when extrapolated to a national scale.¹²⁸ Maurice's much publicised remarks that only two in five men were suitable for military service was debunked by the Committee, claiming the Major-General had overstated his case.¹²⁹ Critically, Maurice's figure lacked any scientific usefulness because it combined two mutually exclusive figures, the 34.6% of rejections by medical examiners and 2.1% of soldiers subsequently lost before completion of two

years service, with a conjectural figure of soldiers rejected initially by recruiting officers before the enrolees were sent for medical examination.¹³⁰

6.5.3 Redefining Decay

To establish greater clarity on the terminology of racial science, the Committee following the evidence presented by Alfred Eichholz, differentiated between deterioration and degeneracy. The jargonistic confusion between the two terms and their increasing interchangeability in late-nineteenth-century racial argot proved highly misleading. Deterioration related to the physical impairment of the individual. Following Victorian logic, this diminished state could be rapidly enforced by emigration into the poorest of urban housing, the antithesis of uplifting cottage living. Deterioration of an individual's physique was rapid and easily detectable, particularly for pseudo-*degeneracy* theorists intent on discovering examples of an evolutionary reversal. Degeneration proceeded over a significantly longer period and referred to the biological decay of the race. However, the vogue for racial science and attendant studies of physique had not been instituted for sufficient time to detect 'real manifestations of collective decay'. Therefore, the advocacy of a dilution of mental and physical virtues in second or third generation urban dwellers in reality carried little authenticity. By accepting these definitions, comparisons with the past were ruled futile and highly speculative, dependent upon nostalgic remembrance rather than science. Maurice, in giving evidence before the 1904 Committee conceded that 'we have no statistics in the past that would enable us to compare with the statistics of the present'.¹³¹ All of this served to refute the rural racial archetype as little more than Pastoral fantasy and not a standard figure from which to base the decay of the English race upon. George Haynes Fosbroke, the Worcestershire County Medical Officer, was therefore particularly guilty of unconsciously blending science with romantic idealism by grounding his evidence before the Committee upon hearsay and memory.¹³²

The accumulation of evidence undermining the statistical validity of degeneracy, instituted a close questioning of the intimacy between occupation (in our case agriculture), patriotism and racial deterioration. The assertion of the soldier-farmer and the rural racial archetype therefore has to be contextualised within Victorian pessimism capable of manufacturing physical degeneracy from uninformed readings of biological and Darwinist theory. The soldier-farmer ideal therefore, is a cultural creation of an ethnic model with little basis in science. When Haggard refers to the land as the mother of the race in an appeal for farming salvation, his conviction is situated less in scientific rationalism, and fashioned more upon the popular taste for a romantic embodiment of Englishness. Ultimately, the solitary conclusion the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration arrived at acknowledged the

unproven basis of degeneracy as a recent biological trait within the English race.¹³³ No statistical proof existed that attested to decay multiplying within each generation, that is, the weak and enfeebled breeding a distended under-class.

*With reference to Professor Karl Pearson's statement that degeneration arises from excessive breeding in the worst classes and diminished breeding in the best, 'the Committee have not been able to obtain decided confirmation of this view', which therefore at present is only a deduction, unsupported by positive facts.*¹³⁴

Such damning assertions favoured environmental determinist explanations for the shaping of intellect and physique, in so far as contradicting claims that an inferior rural residue could never reproduce the rustic archetype.¹³⁵ D.J. Cunningham remained confident that the establishment of a mean physical standard, with the help of anthropometric science, would counter any suspicion of racial suicide. In ascribing a standard that was 'the inheritance of the people as a whole', Cunningham proclaimed the natural tendency of racial groups was to revert to this mean measurement. Factors such as poverty, which forced millions to deviate from this figure, could be eradicated by environmental solutions such as housing improvement. Cunningham based his theory upon 'normal' conditions in which he claimed a constancy of physical dimensions occurred.¹³⁶

The transferral of scientific affirmations of this potential racial equilibrium into the farming debate added further impetus to attempts to resolve the agrarian crisis. Land reform movements attacked the landlordist farming system that subjected the labouring population to extreme poverty in ill-equipped housing. Through a dual process of revitalisation and modernisation of agriculture, the rustic residue could in time invigorate itself, with the added prospect that migrants to the city could return. G.H. Fosbroke, contended in typical fashion for a member of the pro-reform Worcestershire County Council, that solutions to agrarian and racial woes lay in the provision of land.¹³⁷ Following environmentalist logic, the attendant reversal of the degenerative trend through rural in-migration would be accompanied by the restoration of the quintessentially healthy English rustic existence, instilled through a re-occupation of that most patriotic of English space, the countryside.

6.6 Summary

The anonymous author of the 1911 article entitled 'Degeneracy and Pessimism' quite accurately warned of the dangers of over-reaction to unsubstantiated evidence presented in the name of racial science. At a time of cultural disorder, convenient explanations to the complex problem of racial suicide and the reproduction of a withered race, the 'cockneyfication of the village', proved particularly attractive.¹³⁸ Contributors to the Condition of Rural England discourse were critical in the ensuing

translation process of bourgeois tastes for both Pastoral romanticism and Victorian spiritualism into an agrarian dimension. Thus depression was framed along with insanitary urban housing, as a constituent in the collapse of a racial equilibrium. Through the work of Haggard in particular and his celebration of the ethnic superiority of rustic labourers, the racial emphasis of Ruralists may seem somewhat misplaced, particularly in its distracting influence from the 'real' issues of farm failure. As countless sociological essays of the period testify, scientific paradigms and popular cultural observations on the state of the nation were implicitly linked. The generic recitation of a series of 'truthful' agricultural vignettes served to personalise and embellish the mythical rustic archetype with 'real' rather than poetic figures. This cultural appropriation of the life-style of a particular social group occurred at a time when the centrality of ethnicity to an emergent nation state identity was conceived.¹³⁹ The natural symbiosis of rurality and patriotism combined to portray the country resident as the quintessential expression of Englishness, with a loaded assumption that, consequently, agrarian workers were considered to offer a greater willingness to engage in combat. However, army recruitment statistics did not concur with such claims. Overwhelmingly, recruits were urban based, yet the myth of the soldier-farmer persisted.

The threat posed by agricultural depression to the English reserve force received scant attention previously, a motivating factor behind the Condition of Rural England movement that attempted to expose the significance of depression beyond economic parameters.¹⁴⁰ Ultimately, the question of physique presented additional and unwarranted cultural baggage. Rural evidence of bodily decay, if the suspect empirical basis of such claims can be accepted, unhelpfully shifted an important debate on the state of farming away from the real topic of an ageing workforce and future labour resource problems into less tangible issues of racial suicide and the health of the nation.¹⁴¹ Perhaps this change in emphasis revealed an awareness that increased farming mechanisation negated the problem of diminished physical capacity for outdoor work.

The availability of statistical data on physical development as supplied by the army was as pertinent as it was misleading. As the work of Walter Gattie typified, popular myths of brawny rural labourers were confirmed by statistics revealing superior weight and height. However, physical difference was minimal between outdoor occupations and urban-based industrial work. Attendant comments by Maurice, Thomas Savill and others, not least those writers with a vested interest in the fortunes of rural society, such as Haggard and F.E. Green, that the countryside offered superior fighters, make the army data of special interest to this thesis, highlighting the connection between militarism and agriculture. At a time of poor economic profits, D. J. Cunningham's relationship between financial misfortune and

recruitment into the army should have proven veritable, as rural dwellers were coerced into alternative, more remunerative occupations. This proves to be a fallacy as manufacturing industries with high wages overwhelmingly attracted the attention of the rural migrant. Unfortunately, evidence from the period remains unclear, distorted by the drive for conscription first by the Cardwell reforms and later by the South African War. In reality the data offered only short-term evidence when a long survey period was required to offer biological indicators of racial degeneration. Any conclusions derived remained temporally baseless. The development of a physical standard may have revealed rural physical deterioration to be purely imaginary, a position firmly espoused by Mr J. Gray, Treasurer of the Anthropometric Institute and Secretary of the Anthropometric Committee of the British Association, not least because modern judgements were made by emotional readings of the past.¹⁴² Scientific debate was instead, swiftly subverted by a mythologization of the racial issue similar to the erratic process fuelling melodramatic speculation on the future of farming.

With hindsight, the Condition of Rural England movement appears to have asked a false question. Though the well-meaning intentions of many rural realist authors was to promote 'real' depression, too often the genre became bogged down in asking false questions, comparing romanticised readings of past golden ages with overwrought fears for the present. Thus the bodily decline in the rural workforce, if it such a problem ever took place, was in the majority of cases little more than an ageing of the workforce. In any case the increased mechanisation of farming did away with the relevancy of numerous *rural* degeneracy fears. The security threat was also a heavily mythologised false question. Though army statistics were heavily flawed, one absolute certainty that could be drawn was that the majority of recruits were now urban-based. For better or worse, the towns and cities of Britain had to be accepted as the real 'reservoirs of strength'. In reality the fear of rural racial decay was merely symbolic, a nostalgic revival of past tradition.

The racial question and its connection with farming represented the clearest expression of the central theme to this chapter: the absorption of localised farming failure into the wider neuroses and obsessions of late nineteenth-century England. The theoretical crux of this hypothesis suggests the Victorian public were unable to grasp economic and social subtleties of depression until less esoteric reports from the farm were composed in a language directed at general consumption. Thus the geography of depression is skewed to fit popular romantic conceptions of arcadian England and failure interpreted in terms of the ultimate destruction of a fading rustic tradition, to add greater emphasis to the plight of the countryside. Thus, the financial anguish of the labouring classes is ignored in favour of portraying the landowner in a sympathetic light, because in relative terms the establishment incurred more substantial losses.

Thus the simple farm worker assumes the role as the foundation upon which the success of the nation has been and will be built. Once written down, these biases, prejudices and readings of distress become encoded in both popular and historical interpretations of failure. Parochial failures were subsumed into literary conceptions. Yet within local contexts these failures were catastrophic enough to oust labour from the land, either directly or by encouraging a sense of terminal gloom.

The role of geography is vital in that communication, or more accurately, the lack of communication between varying spatial levels sanctions the mythologization of depression, with people like Rider Haggard, possessive of interests in his own farm, English nationhood and Empire, acting as conduits between all three levels. Frequently, as this section has demonstrated, concepts and issues with regard to one level are transformed, then transferred into other spatial levels. For example, the idea of imperial overstretch fuelled a compensatory inward-looking patriotism which in turn sought a revival of rustic customs of a nostalgic golden age. Social observations at the national scale are incongruously condensed into the confines of the parish to explain individual farm bankruptcies. Statistical 'silences' such as in ascertaining the extent of the rural exodus, were filled with philosophical reflection or outright conjecture.

¹The concept of the English rural labourer representing the quintessential racial type assumed iconic status within a wide variety of texts connected with rural life, both idealistic and technical. Masterman was particularly alert to the symbolism of 'George Bourne', one of the more nostalgic writers on the countryside and his famous depiction of an old Surrey labourer. For Masterman, the old rustic offered 'an illuminating picture of an old man who himself stands for the last relic of a vanishing race'. C.F.G. Masterman (1909) *Op Cit.* 152; G. Bourne, (1909) *Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer*.

²'...the young children lack [rural] interest, and they long for the amusement of the town, because they are fed on amusement'. 'Mrs Close', Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. *Minutes of Evidence Vol. II (1904) Cd2210, q2,622, 117.*

³G.M. Trevelyan, *The Past and Future in C.F.G. Masterman (Ed) The Heart of the Empire (London 1901) 405.*

⁴W.M. Gattie, *The Physique of European Armies Fortnightly Review 47 (new series) (1890) 566-585*; G.F. Shee, *The Deterioration of the National Physique Nineteenth Century 53 (1903) 797-806*; P.M. Roxby, *Rural Depopulation in England During the Nineteenth Century Nineteenth Century and After 71 (1912) 174-190*; "Miles" *Where to get Men Contemporary Review 81 (1902) 78-87*; Maurice, Major-Gen. Sir Frederick *National Health: A Soldiers Study Contemporary Review 83 (1903) 41-57.*

⁵For a broader discussion on the investigative remit of the committee see R. Soloway, *Counting the Degenerates: the statistics of race deterioration in Edwardian England Journal of Contemporary History 17 (1982) 137-164.*

⁶C. Booth, *Life and Labour of the People of London (London 1903).*

⁷By gaining a fuller understanding of what these dimensions were, a more focused effort into the degree of deterioration from this mean could be pursued. For example, to establish whether the perceived decline in the stature of the English race was real or imagined, Cunningham proposed the establishment of a Central Anthropometric Bureau. J. Gray, an expert on degeneracy theory suggested before the Committee on Physical Deterioration that a mean physical standard could be defined as the 'minimum physique which, under depressed circumstances, a race reverts to'. Gray, J. (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Minutes of Evidence. Vol. II, Cd 2210. q3,119, 136-137. Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration (1904) Vol. I, Part ii, para. 43 and 45, 8.

⁸Not all rural commentators agreed with the consensus that rustic outmigration was pernicious. P.A. Graham for one thought the transferral of rural labour meant rural work ethics could be usefully employed in the city for the benefit of the nation, rather than idling in the countryside where, despite claims by farmers of a shortage of labour, there was a lack of real job opportunities. 'When the vigorous, enterprising countryman finding no adequate outlets for his energy and ambition at the ploughtail, comes to push his fortune in town,' wrote Graham, 'he is not doing harm, but good. Save for the interfusion of new blood, the urban population would languish and become enfeebled'. Lennard offers an obtuse refinement of that view by suggesting the physically fit and most able rural workers may not have been ideal a farming perspective as these workers continually looked to the city as a way to escape the drudgery and forfeiture of rural life, thus contributing to the sense of rural instability. This assumption lead Lennard to conclude that 'the contention that the best men have left the countryside is at best ambiguous'. P.A. Graham, *Op Cit.* 2; R. Lennard, *Op Cit.* 39.

⁹The term Boer derives from the Dutch word for small farmer.

¹⁰H.R. Haggard (1902), *Op Cit.*, Vol. II, 568.

¹¹An anonymous reviewer of Haggard's 'A Farmer's Year' for *The Rural World* noted that the author effectively contrasted the town with the country, suggesting that the former 'is not fit for the bucolic element'. Degradation of the rural character becomes an inescapable inevitability through immigration into the towns. 'Review of Rider Haggard's 'A Farmer's Year' (1899) *The Rural World* Vol. XI. 7 October 1899 no. 594, 79.

¹²N. Stepan, Biological Degeneration: Races and Proper Places in J.E. Chamberlin and S.L. Gilman, (Eds) *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress* (New York 1989) 99.

¹³The inference is that actual physical evidence of deterioration was being manipulated to suit the *vogue* for deterioration theory. As I shall explore later, the army recruiting statistics were severely flawed, so evidence of a physical decline could not be successfully proven. Any minimal diminution in stature for instance recorded by albeit unreliable data, was grossly exaggerated to feed the insatiable desire of Victorian's to fuel their own angst.

¹⁴Jackson and Penrose record that frequently the Social Darwinist movement confused survival *between* species with survival *within* a species group, hence the popularity of racial degeneration arguments, concurring with a fear of a growing degenerative underclass. P. Jackson and J. Penrose, *Constructions of Race, Place and Nation* (London 1993) 4; R. Love, (1982) *Darwinism and Social Darwinism*, (Victoria 1982) 41.

¹⁵There was no shortage of witnesses for the Condition of Rural England writers that gloomily predicted the terminal decline of agriculture due to the shortage of labour forcing farmers to rely on an increasingly ageing workforce. For example Haggard quotes a Mr Rawlence of Bishopstone, Wiltshire. 'Unless something unforeseen occurs' stated Rawlence, 'farming must come to an end for lack of labour'. H.R. Haggard (1902), *Op Cit.* 22.

¹⁶It is generally accepted by every student of modern civilization, from whatever standpoint he may be interested, that occupation and health are intimately interdependent'. Anon., *The Physique of the Nation Edinburgh Review* 230 (1919) 130-142.

¹⁷Lord Braborne declared that 'the tenant farmers of England were not a class who could be easily induced to agitate'. *The Times* 25 April 1881, col. c, 18 - 'Lord Braborne and the Farmers Alliance'; P. Keating, *Into Unknown England 1866-1913* (Manchester 1976) 11-33. A. Mearns, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (London 1883).

¹⁸An anonymous author writing in the *Edinburgh Review* of 1915 explored a number of ideological difficulties in some of the more outlandish theories on degeneration and pessimism which apparently failed to separate the distinctions between environmental determinism and biological inheritance. Anon, Degeneracy and Pessimism *Edinburgh Review* 214 (1911) 138-164.

¹⁹'The dream of the countryman is to get away from the country, just as it is the dream of many townsmen to get away from the town'. G.B. Longstaff, Rural Depopulation *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 56 (1893) 380-433.

²⁰'I believe the evolutionists are right and that there is a general process of deterioration going on.' Shadwell's support for a theory of racial descent was based upon an assumption that the physically and mentally deficient would propagate such characteristics in succeeding generations, probably as biological traits rather than as a process of nurture. A. Shadwell, (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Minutes of Evidence. Vol. II, Cd 2210. q12,245, 450 and q12,306, 452.

²¹As Pick notes, there is a growing argument that much of Darwin's evolutionary theory, his metaphors and narratives, were intent on addressing the earliest of the Condition of England theories on decay and racial degeneration. Gareth Stedman-Jones confirms this viewpoint by suggesting the following middle-class beliefs contributed to a universal theory of decay: the agricultural depression, the rural exodus, the increasing pre-eminence of urban England, foreign competition and free trade. D. Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder 1848-1918* (Cambridge 1989) 2 and 6; G. Stedman-Jones, *Outcast London: A Study of the Relationship between the Classes in Victorian Society* (London 1971) 150.

²²'...if the [poor] conditions were kept on long enough, ultimately you might get a permanent degeneration, but that would take a vast number of generations to produce.' L. Mackenzie, (1902) Royal Commission on Physical Training (Scotland) Minutes of Evidence. Vol. II, Cd 1508. q6,983, 263.

²³Ibid.

²⁴The sociological tomes in particular were overwhelmingly urban in outlook, featuring the works of a whole variety of observers, Booth and Rowntree included. Pearson's outlook at the turn of the century was very much removed from the apocalyptic Socialist vision that was the subject of Edward Bellemy's *Looking Backward*, nevertheless it embraced a fear that England was entering a hundred year phase towards the millennium in which national degeneracy, both physical and moral, would become prevalent. However, as an anonymously authored article for the *Edinburgh Review* stated, the fear of degeneracy, not just in England, but France and Germany also, has always been present, 'even...[in] those [times] which now appear to us to have been the greatest and most prosperous'. C.H. Pearson, *National Life and Character* (London 1892); C.H. Pearson, The Causes of Pessimism *Fortnightly Review* 54 (new series) (1893) 441-453; W.S. Lilly, National Life and Character *Quarterly Review* 177 (1883) 105-130; Anon. (1911) Degeneration and Pessimism.

²⁵G. Stedman-Jones, *Op Cit.* 129.

²⁶Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration (1904) Vol. I, Part ii, para. 189, 35.

²⁷Nancy Stepan suggests that the shift to social classification of deterioration is evident in labelling of urban poor, prostitutes, criminals and the insane as 'degenerate types'. N. Stepan, *Op Cit.* 98.

²⁸Bowler suggests that towards the end of the nineteenth century, an increasing number of academics accepted that racial construction shaped the character of the nation. Therefore, the elevation of an archetype was an inevitable part of the process. P.J. Bowler, *The Invention of Progress: The Victorians and the Past* (London 1989) 59.

²⁹D. Livingstone, 'Never Shall Ye Make the Crab Walk Straight': an inquiry into the scientific sources of racial geography in F. Driver and G. Rose (Eds) *Nature and Science in the History of Geographical Knowledge* (London 1992) 37-48.

³⁰D. Pick, *Op Cit.*

³¹Walter Gattie suggested that an immediate need existed to physically educate the masses, recognising that the neglect of agriculture was largely to blame for any apparent racial decay. P.M. Roxby, *Op Cit.*; W.M. Gattie, *Op Cit.*

³²Masterman's sense of loss of the English vernacular was also reflected amongst right-wing commentators such as Lord Lansdowne and Herbert Smith. For them, the peculiarities of the English character made England special, and such reservoirs of the pure essence of Englishness could only be found in the countryside. 'If England loses these things, [its difference] she loses much that makes her England, and makes us ready to love her, cherish her, and protect her. It is the rural life of England, quite as much as her commerce and mighty cities, that have been at once the wonder and envy of all nations'. H.C.K. Petty-Fitzmaurice and H.H. Smith, *Landed Incomes and Landed Estates Quarterly Review* 166 (1888) 210-239; C.F.G. Masterman (1909), *Op Cit.*

³³D.J. Cunningham suggested before the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration that 'one point which is established beyond all question is the remarkable influence which environment and nurture exercise upon the development and growth of the child as well as upon the physical excellence attained by the adult'. Cunningham, D.J. (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Minutes of Evidence. Vol. II, Cd 2210. q2,194, 96. G. Stedman-Jones, *Op Cit.* 313.

³⁴'Miles' (1902) *Op Cit.*.

³⁵In terms of reproductive ability such assertions held true to some extent because of an ageing population, though accurate figures detailing the composition of emigrants are not available.

³⁶The point ultimately speculates the benefits of the soil have to be earned and by the late-nineteenth-century, English labourers were less willing to work for a system that offered no palpable returns, let alone a remunerative wage. Haggard once again, relays a letter sent from a Mr Squarey, a gentleman farmer from Salisbury sent to E.G. Strutt which read, 'I have faith that if opportunities were offered akin to those of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, men would be found to reconsider their town tendencies, and would go back to their villages'. There is no sense that the alleged superiority of the rural race is in anyway biological. H.R. Haggard (1902), *Op Cit.* 23.

³⁷The land reformists of Jesse Collings's Rural Labourers' League were not convinced the decline in competitive wages levels was solely to blame for outmigration. They contended, alternatively, that the increasing political mobilisation of the rural labourer had created a desire to break out of the landlordist system of social control. A denial of basic land rights was for them a motivating factor. *The Rural World* Vol. XI 7 October 1899 no. 564, 79.

³⁸Edward Chamberlin and Sander Gilman contend the cultural connotations of degeneracy and its associated images of decay ultimately 'overwhelm the biological character of the paradigm'. Predictions of the imminent destruction of the English race fed the lurid tastes of the Victorian middle classes. The tenuous biological origins of much degeneracy theory added some sort of spurious respectability. Alternatively, meanings were reversible. Nancy Stepan claims racial degeneration theory offered social and political meanings to biological scientific debates. J.E. Chamberlin and S.L. Gilman, *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress* (New York 1989) viii; N. Stepan, *Op Cit.* 97.

³⁹D. Pick, *Op Cit.* 6.

⁴⁰Gilman touches upon the flexibility of degeneration theory, the fluidity of its intellectual boundaries allowing the union of 'cultural, scientific, religious, medical and social beliefs by apparently all of them...[offering]...an explanatory "truth"'. S.C. Gilman, *Political Theory and Degeneration: From Left to Right, from up to down* in J.E. Chamberlin and S.L. Gilman, *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress* (New York 1989) 173; G. Stedman-Jones, *Op Cit.* 150.

⁴¹W.R. Inge, The Future of the English Race *Edinburgh Review* 229 (1919) 209-232.

⁴²Maurice, Gen. Sir F. (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Vol. II. Minutes of Evidence Cd 2210, q371, 16.

⁴³Anne Summers similarly suggests the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration was heavily imbued with a 'militarist tone'. A. Summers, Edwardian Militarism in R. Samuel, (Ed) *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity* Vol. I. (London 1989) 242.

⁴⁴Hill-Climo was a retired Lieutenant-Colonel in the Army Medical Staff. W. Hill-Climo, Race Betterment: The Nation's Duty *Eugenics Review* 1 (1909) 194-202.

⁴⁵G.F. Shee, *Op Cit.*

⁴⁶Close could offer no statistical evidence to back up her claims, though she attributed the blame for deterioration firmly upon a bad diet. 'Mrs Close' (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Vol. II. Minutes of Evidence Cd 2210, q2,555, 115 and q2,641-2,644, 118.

⁴⁷G.F. Shee, *Op Cit.* James Long noted in *The Rural World* that it was the peasant population of France that had fought its battles and offered the nation some degree of stability. 'The backbone of a country like France does not consist of the inhabitants of the great cities which, in the past, have led France into deep trouble, but in the peaceable and thrifty agriculturalists who have fought the battles of the empire and paid the reckoning'. J. Long, 'Petite Culture' *The Rural World* Vol. VIII No. 415 November 1896 828.

⁴⁸'Although it [the English countryside] no longer produces the bulk of the food they eat, from it our towns draw their strength, for with its healthy men and women their pale blood is replenished". H.R. Haggard (1902), Vol. I, *Op Cit.* 2.

⁴⁹Gattie is one of the first authors to recognise that a dilatory response to rural change since the repeal of the Corn Laws had a racial application.

⁵⁰"Persimmon", *Depression in English Agriculture and Its Practical Remedy* (London 1897) 12.

⁵¹Short claims that the popular Victorian conception was that agricultural life was more 'wholesome, more spiritually uplifting'. J.R. Short, *Op Cit.* 30.

⁵²Long drew explicit attention to the relationship between the success of farming, thus keeping the labouring stock tied to the land, and the health of the English race as a whole. 'The maintenance of the British character' Long continued, 'depends upon the maintenance of her great rural industry'. His reference to 'thews and sinews' again relates to the medico-scientific language that had become ingrained in both popular journal and even technical literature of the period. J Long, The British Farmer and the Deluge of Foreign Produce *Fortnightly Review* 54 (1893) 184-193.

⁵³H.C.K. Petty-Fitzmaurice, and H.H. Smith, *Op Cit.*

⁵⁴Maurice, Major-Gen. Sir F. (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Minutes of Evidence Cd 2210, q358, 16.

⁵⁵'It may not be true, though it is often asserted, that after the family of a labourer in a big town dies out after three generations'. H.D. Harben, *The Rural Problem* (London 1913) 54.

⁵⁶H.R. Haggard (1899), *Op Cit.* 466

⁵⁷C. Booth,(1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Vol. II. Minutes of Evidence Cd 2210, q1,151, 53.

⁵⁸Stedman-Jones reveals that '..social Darwinism added a cosmic significance to the struggle between the country and the town. Biologism provided a framework for a comprehensive theory of hereditary urban degeneration'. G. Stedman-Jones, *Op Cit.* 128-130.

⁵⁹Stedman-Jones suggests that both the railway and the bus industries recruited heavily from the influx of country labour, jobs which would have otherwise gone to urban dwellers. *Ibid.* 131 and 148.

⁶⁰Wilson (1904) 'Depletion of Rural Districts by the Exodus of the Best Types' - Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Cd 2175, 34, para. 186.

⁶¹Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration (1904) Final Report. Vol. I. Cd 2175, para. 139, 26.

⁶²Intriguingly, and no evidence is available to answer such a query, it must be speculated how much the reverse flow of urban migrants to the villages was because work was available, despite low wages in farming, beyond the obvious seasonality of market gardening or the hop-picking season in Kent. Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration (1904) Final Report. Vol. I. Cd 2175, para. 142, 27.

⁶³'...among the candidates for recruits in the army, there is a larger percentage of rejections among the urban recruits on account of physical unfitness than among the rural candidates'. T.D. Savill, (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Minutes of Evidence Cd 2210, q6,897, 258.

⁶⁴Young men of our large towns and cities are not prepossessed with the inducements held out by her Majesty's Service, they prefer the liberty and gaiety common to a town life, hence this national aspect of the question is of the utmost importance'. B.D. Brette, *How to Save the Nation in Time of War...And do away with Agricultural Depression* (Lowestoft 1897) 30-31.

⁶⁵If the farm labourer once more follow agricultural pursuits, we should have less difficulty in filling up the gaps in our army, for it is from this source that we obtain our best men'. Brette, places faith in the regenerative powers of the rural environment in diametrical opposition to the town which was ultimately degenerative and enervating. B.D. Brette, *Op Cit.* 30.

⁶⁶T.D. Savill, (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Minutes of Evidence Cd 2210, q6,897, 258.

⁶⁷D.J. Cunningham, (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Minutes of Evidence Cd 2210, q2,194, 96. Savill contended that 'I think...[degeneracy] is chiefly due to the removal from rural to urban life...'. T.D. Savill, (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Minutes of Evidence Cd 2210, q6,897, 258.

⁶⁸Haggard, H.R. (1899) *Op Cit.* 460.

⁶⁹Fosbroke's conviction in a long-term improvement in the country diet conflicted with other evidence presented by 'Mrs Close' and Sir John Gorst at the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration.

⁷⁰Fosbroke claimed that following numerous conversations with farmers, he was moved to conclude that '...generally the farmers say that the men are of a weaker type altogether. The more robust men go into the towns.' G.H. Fosbroke, (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Final Report. Vol. I Section iv. Depletion of Rural Districts By the Exodus of the Best Types. Cd 2175, para. 187, 35. G.H. Fosbroke, (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Vol. II. Minutes of Evidence Cd 2210, q6,539-6,543.

⁷¹In addition to the consumption of better foodstuffs, Fosbroke reckoned drunkenness, a 'menac[e] to human life and vitality' was diminishing in rural areas. G.H. Fosbroke, (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Final Report. Vol. I Section iv. Depletion of Rural Districts By the Exodus of the Best Types. Cd 2175, para. 188, 35.

⁷²'Mrs Close', Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Minutes of Evidence Vol. II (1904) Cd2210, q2,593, 116.

⁷³*Ibid.* q2,563.

⁷⁴Ibid. q2,573-79, 116.

⁷⁵Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration (1904) Appendix. Vol. III. Cd 2186. Appendix VI Table A.i, 1.

⁷⁶'...I think that the adulterated food which they eat in the country is pernicious - the adulterated tinned milk and the extremely bad bacon, and the extremely bad bread - bakers' bread'. Mrs Close', Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Minutes of Evidence Vol. II (1904) Cd2210, q2,646, 118.

⁷⁷'Miles', Where to get Men *Contemporary Review* 81 (1902) 78-87.

⁷⁸'Mrs Close' also presented evidence that concurred with Tallerman's assertion, believing the French peasant ate a more nourishing range of foods than the English labourer. D. Tallerman, *Agricultural Distress and Trade Depression: Their Remedy in the Commercial Realization of Home Grown Produce* (London 1889) 392; Mrs Close', Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Minutes of Evidence Vol. II (1904) Cd2210, q2,569, 115.

⁷⁹Royal Commission on Physical Training (Scotland) (1902) Final Report. Cd 1507. para 121.

⁸⁰E.S. Passmore, (1904) "Summary of Reports from Superintendents of Lunatic Asylums". Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Appendix, Vol. III. Cd 2186. Appendix xxvii, para xvii, 98.

⁸¹E. Jones, (1904) "Summary of Reports from Superintendents of Lunatic Asylums". Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Appendix, Vol. III. Cd 2186. Appendix xxvii, para ii, 97.

⁸²Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. (1904) Final Report. Vol. I Section iv. Depletion of Rural Districts By the Exodus of the Best Types. Cd 2175, para. 184, 34.

⁸³Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. (1904) Final Report. Vol. I Section iv. Depletion of Rural Districts By the Exodus of the Best Types. Cd 2175, para. 205, 37.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵A. Shadwell, (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Vol. II. Cd 2210. q12,240, 450.

⁸⁶The security threat had, as noted earlier, been posed by the military reversals of the Boer War. The depression, sharpened this anxiety by undermining the traditional rural reserve. Such fears were sensed by the 1904 Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration, the publication of which reinforced the conviction by official recognition of the problem.

⁸⁷W.M. Gattie, *Op Cit*.

⁸⁸J.H. Grainger, *Patriotisms: Britain 1900-1939* (London 1986) 267.

⁸⁹B. Bond, Recruiting the Victorian Army *Victorian Studies* 5 (1962) 331-339.

⁹⁰Maurice, Major-Gen. Sir F. (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Minutes of Evidence. Cd 2218, q366, 16.

⁹¹For the writers at *The Rural World* the original idea for the yeoman cavalry was indisputably Young's. *The Rural World* 30 December 1899 Vol. XI no. 576, 1035. Spiers suggested that the Yeomanry was first raised in 1794 to repel possible invasion. E.M. Spiers, *The Army and Society 1815-1914* (London 1980) 79.

⁹²A. Young, *The Example of France, A Warning to Britain* (London 1793) 88.

⁹³Ibid. 100.

⁹⁴Young's sympathy for soldier-farmers was constructed upon a notion of defence. The yeoman regiments would be 'essential to the salvation of the community'. The farmer is portrayed in his traditional role as the defender of nationhood. Ibid. 100.

⁹⁵Maurice reported to the Physical Deterioration Committee that the yeomen had 'formed the bulk of the army in earlier days'. See Maurice, Major-Gen. Sir F. (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration - Minutes of Evidence Cd 2210, q371, 16.

⁹⁶E.M. Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army 1868-1902* (Manchester 1992) 312.

⁹⁷Miles (1902) *Op Cit.*

⁹⁸The significance of a growing urban-born population would not have been lost on those Victorian observers convinced that the second generation urban bred were not possessive of the vigour and health of the rural-type.

⁹⁹W.M. Gattie, *Op Cit.*

¹⁰⁰Maurice's figure was based on two sets of obtainable data, the number who left the army after two years (2.1%) with the number rejected by the military medical officers (34.6%), and a purely conjectural figure of the number of men rejected by the recruiting officers, the figures of which had not been collected. Maurice outlines in the same paper three types of recruitment method. Firstly, potential soldiers could be rejected by the sergeants and recruiting officers if the men were not likely to be passed. Secondly, rejection by medical officers following the routine physical inspection and thirdly the test of trial in service itself. Lieut.-Col. W.G. Don, produced figures for the earlier Royal Commission on Physical Training (Scotland) that suggested 31% of approximately 12,000 recruits examined for the army had to be rejected on grounds of disease, physical unsuitability or other defects. Maurice, Major-Gen. Sir F. (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration - Minutes of Evidence Cd 2210, q297-299, 14. Don, Lieut.-Col. W.G. (1902) Royal Commission on Physical Training (Scotland) Final Report. Vol. I. Cd 1507. para 100, 21.

¹⁰¹Maurice, Major-Gen. Sir F. (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration - Minutes of Evidence Cd 2210, q371, 16.

¹⁰²Maurice reported his experiences from visiting the Herbert Hospital once a month to discharge men from the army whom he believed were never capable of fighting. 'As soon as they were put to any average amount of work they broke down in health'. Maurice, Major-Gen. Sir F. (1903) *Op Cit.*

¹⁰³However, stature as a criteria for assessing physique proved highly contentious. Thomas D. Savill had asserted at the Royal Commission on Physical Training (Scotland) that throughout the nineteenth-century there had been a growth in height. Yet in terms of chest measurement, Savill was convinced that a narrowing of the torso had occurred. T.D. Savill, (1902) Royal Commission on Physical Training (Scotland) Minutes of Evidence. Vol. II. Cd 1508. q6,925, 258.

¹⁰⁴W.M. Gattie, *Op Cit.*

¹⁰⁵G.F. Shee, *Op Cit.*

¹⁰⁶In 1872 the minimum height restriction was lowered to 5 feet 5 inches and eleven years later this figure was dropped by a further two inches. In 1897, the level dropped another inch, a move that proved temporary as in 1901 the restriction was finally reduced to enable the army to enlist men who were just five feet in height.

¹⁰⁷Shee also offered measurements in a similar decline in weight, with the typical recruit accepted into the army reducing in average weight from nine stones in 1890 to eight stone twelve pounds in 1900. G.F. Shee, (1903) *Op Cit.*

¹⁰⁸Gattie suggests that a soldier of five foot one inch in a race of small men would 'probably be more effective than a five foot one inch soldier of a tall race'. W.M. Gattie, *Op Cit.*

¹⁰⁹J. Haughton, *The Depression in Agriculture and a Proposal for its Remedy* (London 1879) 31.

¹¹⁰The German research was taken from a 1877 survey. Gattie similarly wrote solemnly 'it seems...that so far as statistics are available, or may be accepted as a guide, there is a general tendency on the continent towards physical improvement. At any rate, there are no such serious indicators in the opposite direction as those which have caused natural disquietude in this country'. W.M. Gattie, *Op Cit.*; G.F. Shee, *Op Cit.*

¹¹¹Shee sought inspiration from Britain's European rivals, where conscription had become commonplace.

¹¹²D.J. Cunningham suggested that the reliance on army statistics could not offer 'unimpeachable' evidence with regard to a national physical standard, because the data set was generally unrepresentative of the population as a whole. D.J. Cunningham, (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Minutes of Evidence Cd 2210, q2,187, 95.

¹¹³William Hill-Climo was moved to write that to overcome the apparent continental advantage in determining the physical strength of soldiers, a system of training whereby assessment of physique could be conducted was vital to ensure the safety of Britain and the continuation of Empire. Presently, such ideas were being met with perilous indifference. W. Hill-Climo, *Op Cit.*

¹¹⁴'What good is it to us [the nation] from any health or wealth of nations standpoint to add to our census numbers a population of stunted, unhealthy types' implored Maurice, '...that must in their turn with the developed peculiarities of their parentage produce by their premature marriages, their ignorance of fatherhood and maternity, and their unwholesome surroundings, a yet more degenerate race?' "Miles" (1902) *Op Cit.*

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹¹⁶Miles used the analogy of a football match to prove the point. 'Two small teams on either side are actually playing, thousands have paid gate-money to look on, while hundreds of thousands will buy the halfpenny papers that graphically describe the sport'. "Miles" (1902) *Op Cit.*

¹¹⁷Maurice, Major-Gen. Sir F. (1903) *Op Cit.*

¹¹⁸The final report of the Physical Deterioration Committee noted that no firm conclusions could be drawn from the statistical evidence received in relation to army recruits, not least because the class of people that were applying to join up were not necessarily representative of the nation as a whole. Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Final Report. Vol. I Cd 2175.

¹¹⁹D.J. Cunningham claimed before the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration that the army statistical resource offered little conclusive proof on physical standards. D.J. Cunningham, (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Minutes of Evidence Cd 2210, q2,187, 95. G.F. Shee, *Op Cit.*

¹²⁰D.J. Cunningham, (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Minutes of Evidence Cd 2210, q2,188, 95

¹²¹Hill-Climo lends support to this belief by suggesting that the recruit is the 'fittest of the unfit people'. W. Hill-Climo, *Op Cit.*

¹²²Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Final Report. Vol. I Cd 2175, para. 25, 5.

123'Common soldiers, far from being considered more virtuous than the civilians whom they protected, were considered less so. To accept the King's shilling was to concede social defeat'. J.H. Grainger, *Op Cit.*; B. Bond, *Op Cit.* Bond suggests that cheap beer had been a critical factor in attracting what he termed the 'scum' element. A. Summers, *Op Cit.* 239.

124Giffen, Sir Robert The Standard of Strength for our Army: a business estimate *Nineteenth Century* 49 (1901) 931-939; Bond offered a more recent appraisal of the situation stating that '...even the harsh incentives of insecurity, a high level of unemployment, and a low standard of living failed to supply a steady flow of candidates for the Queen's shilling.' B. Bond, *Op Cit.*

125W.M. Gattie, *Op Cit.*

126"Miles" (1902) *Op Cit.*

127Ibid.

128Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Final Report. Vol. I Cd 2175, para. 5, 1.

129'The committee [could not] accept the basis of the alarmist statement for which he [Maurice] is responsible, that of those who wish to be soldiers only two out of five are to be found in the ranks at the end of two years'. Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Final Report. Vol. I Cd 2175, para. 33, 6.

130The exclusiveness of the two data sets stems from the different criteria for physical failure, firstly to join the army and secondly for the more strenuous tests once admitted into active service.

131Maurice, Major-Gen. Sir F. (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Vol. II. Minutes of Evidence Cd 2210, q374, 17.

132Fosbroke's 'guilt' is even more apparent when it is considered that he was a scientist in training, taking a diploma in public health from Cambridge University. George Haynes Fosbroke was appointed County Medical Officer of Health in 1889, following a diploma in public health at Cambridge University. He held the post until 1925 when he died in office at the age of seventy-five.

133'The impressions gathered from the great majority of the witnesses examined do not support the belief that there is any general progressive physical deterioration'. Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Final Report. Vol. I Cd 2175, 13; Anon. (1911) Degeneration and Pessimism.

134Quote extracted from, Anon. (1911) "Degeneration and Pessimism", which in turn paraphrases the conclusions of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration.

135This assumption relied upon nostalgic comparisons with the past in pre-supposing the existence of a model type.

136Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Final Report. Vol. I Cd 2175, para. 43, 8. D.J. Cunningham, (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Vol. II. Minutes of Evidence Cd 2210, q2,210.

137G.H. Fosbroke, (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Minutes of Evidence. Vol. II. Cd 2210, q6,565-6,570, 261.

138Anon. (1911) "Degeneration and Pessimism".

139G. Stedman-Jones *Op Cit.*; P. Rich (1987) *Op Cit.*

140The Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration was inaugurated at approximately the same time that Haggard, F.E. Green and others were writing on the significance of depression, though the problem had taken nearly a quarter of a century of failure to manifest.

¹⁴¹Martin anecdotally recites the severity of the ageing labour problem claiming that '...nowhere in the world can you find so large a proportion of the population consisting of old men and women hobbling along with the aid of two sticks as in an Essex village.' J.W. Martin, *Op Cit.* 14.

¹⁴²J. Gray, (1904) Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Minutes of Evidence Cd 2210, q3,344.

Section Three

Reconstituting the Rural: 'Back to the Land', Moral Topographies and Ennobling Space

The soil of the country is in a few hands, and that is the real, the true, and permanent cause of depression.

Joseph Chamberlain M.P.

(Quote extracted from F. Verinder, [1906])

Introduction

Agricultural Depression and the Reformation of the English Land System

This chapter aims to address the spatial dimension behind one particular response to late nineteenth-century rural change. Widespread small holding farming was prompted by both reactionary and radical idealism in addition to more functionalist and economically informed perspectives, attending a need to reinvigorate agriculture following depression.¹ Attention will be paid to the classic 'land reform' schemes such as Jesse Collings's "three acres and a cow" programme, in an attempt to extend the largely ignored Ruralist perspective and assert the duality of meaning in the phrase 'back to the land', placing increased emphasis on the desire to return private, enclosed acres *back* to rural labourers in a drive to recreate the old farming classes of yeoman and peasant farmers. Though the success of the movement will be referred to, of greater interest is ascertaining how small holding schemes organized space upon a reassertion of Englishness through the re-creation of productive areas that conformed to a landscape aesthetic based upon utility. The affirmation of regenerative locations provided the interstices between discourses on patriotism and agricultural prosperity. These propositions will then be situated within a contemporary desire to re-colonise England. Small holding plans were inherently complex and contradictory. Peasant holdings could be modern and reactionary; radical and conservative; revolutionary and passive. By appealing to all these characteristics small holdings offered a sense of 'ennobling space'. Within this enriched milieu, the re-creation of peasant and yeoman stock not only offered social elevation, but also served to instil a sense of morality. Furthermore, small holdings and the ownership of land endowed a notion of nobility upon the individual. Critically however, small holdings as proposed by those sensitive to rural opinions, represented a solution to prolonged agricultural depression and not just a political agitation for land reform.

The popular, late-Victorian yearning for a rustic simple-life, particularly as an aesthetic response to urban industrialism, has been well documented.² Scholarly

attention has focused on 'arts and crafts' inspired retreats into 'deep England' and the anxieties that fuelled a *volte-face* towards nineteenth-century urbanism. Such 'back to the land' impulses, intoxicated with pastoral idealism, have been deconstructed as progenitors to modern day green/environmentalist politics, not least because the late nineteenth-century debate did not conform to a simple Left-Right ideological dichotomy, as land reform evolved into one of the most intricate political issues of the day.³ Subsequent appropriation of picturesque imagery by both the nascent British Socialist movement and vanguard Tory reactionists, has received less attention, despite the fact that all three major parties had formulated 'land plans' by 1913, with the intention of rural rejuvenation through the development of 'peasant agriculture'.⁴ Sadie Ward's *Land Reform in England 1880-1914* provides a detailed econometric history, but a cultural reading of new rural geographies and agricultural depression as motivating factors behind the creation of small holdings is neglected.⁵ S.G. Sturney's celebrated, if somewhat dated, account of small holding construction from the start of the twentieth century was silent on the cultural dimensions of the popular yearning for the soil.⁶ Pyrs Gruffudd has partly redressed this imbalance in a Welsh context through his examination of the modernist seizure of rural histories within a reassertion of nationhood and its mapping in space during the first half of the twentieth century.⁷ However, a need to comprehend more material, agrarian inspired attempts to root Englishmen and women to the soil through a small farming philosophy, and understand how this linked with the burgeoning Condition of Rural England movement, which sought to empower rural voices for the benefit of racial and farming salvation, remains unsatiated.

Comprehension of small farming, the unwritten philosophy of peasant or small holding agriculture, within the multifarious English 'land question', requires reference to more Ruralist, agrarian needs to maintain land inhabitation rather than campaigns for social justice from Socialist reformers or aesthetic drives for the purposes of literature. To avoid re-treading familiar ground this thesis stresses the inherent spatiality of a 'peasant revival' and the emergence of a multi-layered rural geography based upon a blending of material experience and romantic imagining within agrarian based small holding schemes. Duncan and Duncan suggest that landscapes may be destroyed, re-built or re-interpreted to reflect changes in a value system.⁸ The agrarian philosophy of small farming supports this. As small holdings were asserted as expressions of progressive, Ruralist ideology, offering alternative narratives of progress from industrial capitalism, the physical environment was evaluated and mapped to mirror the change in agrarian thinking.

This section will explore the notion of depression as an agent of degeneration, revealing how the nostalgic recognition of the historic importance of farming was

manipulated to form a future, proto-modernist rural ideology. By combining romanticism and functional reality, small holdings offered an opportunity to re-instate an idealised moral topography eroded by depression and field sports. This sublimated and ennobling space would be returned to its rightful agricultural origins. In retrospect, small farming never achieved a dominant position in agricultural practice and as such, this new, more personalised and intensive landscape remained in the realm of egalitarian fantasy. Equally, some pro-landlord commentators favoured greater farm aggregation to allow, both financially and in the physical re-organisation of space, for the increased mechanisation of agriculture. Evershed savoured such a prospect as some *deus ex machina*.

*The clear exhibition...of life springing from death...is the glory of modern science, and the perfect proof of the Creator's infinite goodness.*⁹

The implied criticism, therefore, from technologically-minded farmers expressed a fear that English agriculture still clung to Luddite traditions of the early nineteenth-century with small holdings presenting clearest evidence of an anti-modernist trend. Farming eventually embraced mechanisation, but it is the tales of the vanquished that prove of greater interest to us here, making particular reference to notions of small holdings as forms of resistance against a number of colluding factors, notably industrial capitalism, un-English farming practices, financial ruin and urban encroachment in addition to the central role of offering a farming solution. Ultimately culturally sensitive readings of agricultural dynamics assert the situatedness of small holdings and the small farming philosophy within wider national anxieties of social injustice and racial and spiritual decay, recognising depression presented a significant if misunderstood role in late nineteenth-century cultural, economic and political life.

The Roots of the Small Holding Movement

During the final two decades of the nineteenth-century, against a backdrop of prolonged farming failure, small holding movements focused public awareness upon the need for egalitarian land reform in rural areas by attacking the social coercion and moral inanition of an oligarchic concentration of ownership. Within a multifaceted Utopian framework, reflecting the disparate politics of the land campaigners involved (ranging from the pro-landlord Liberty and Property Defence League who rejected the benefits of small holdings beyond a reworking of existing tenancy agreements through to the revolutionary Socialism of the Land Nationalisation Society), various reformist programmes sought a re-envisionment of rural England to encompass a new proprietary topography that advocated equal rights in landownership and placed individuals, both urban and rural onto small, owner-occupied plots of land, or state run tenancies.¹⁰ Conscious of the extension of the franchise in 1884, the agrarian

programmes were specifically aimed at liberating rural labourers, recognizing their skills and highlighting farming traditions as an under-utilized resource to resurrect farming. The central premise of reform was a nationwide return of the dispossessed peasantry to English soils, reversing the destructive trends of farm aggregation and four centuries of enclosure, thus elevating the subjugated labourer to the unimpeachable status of noble peasant or yeoman. Detractors, such as F.J. Coverdale, agent to Lord Petre, the Essex landowner, branded this idealistic notion of widespread owner occupancy an irresponsible 'fantasy for faddists'.¹¹ Despite the presence of two conflicting standpoints, the movement did represent a shift from the ambivalent position in the affairs of state where agriculture had languished. Agricultural depression, and the laying waste of thousands of acres of formerly productive land left Britain dangerously dependent on overseas supplies, particularly within a politically combustible Europe. Jesse Collings was sufficiently concerned to write to *The Times* on the subject in a letter, entitled 'Our Island Citadel and its food supply'.¹² Collings contended industrial Britain had never possessed a food stock that could sustain more than a few weeks consumption without replenishment from exports. This placed Britain in a fateful position in the event of a continental war. 'It would be easy to show' he concluded, 'that this position was almost solely created by the decay of agriculture'.¹³ In response to a vibrant Condition of Rural England discourse and the perceived atrophy of national well-being, the *agrarian* 'back to the land' movement seized an opportunity to re-invigorate the race by appealing to a sense of patriotism for the protection and advancement of agriculture.

Crudely examined, the campaign for a return to the soil could be simplistically demediated. The first strand defined an aesthetic appreciation of a nostalgic 'Golden Age', a sentimental memory of historic England, invoking the traditional agrarian icons of virtuousness and physique through the establishment of arts and craft settlements.¹⁴ Though limited in number and geographical scale, these communes signalled a positive move to reclaim the countryside from the twin evils of urban degeneration and the pervading culture of the machine, through the preservation of a specifically English rural heritage. This conviction was given added urgency following the failure of agriculture and the resultant rural exodus.¹⁵ Religion was increasingly superseded by a need to commune with Nature, typically expressed through the rediscovery and employment of ancient methods of production, usually in artistic colonies. The foundation of rural craft collectives in 'quintessential countryside' locations, such as C.R. Ashbee's Guild of Handicrafts at Chipping Campden in Gloucestershire and Edward Carpenter's craft guild archetype at Millthorpe, near Sheffield, signified tentative efforts to map this environmental

consciousness onto the land.¹⁶ Stress was placed on the popular definition of 'arcadia', a retreat offering 'wish fulfilment' and consolation for a falling or even fallen race.¹⁷

These Utopianist expressions posited an atmosphere of nostalgia and yearning for England's historic mosaic of customs and conventions within a contemporary rural landscape. Victorian rustic utopianism and its conceptual elevation of a tangible English idyll as an environment within which freedom and justice could be enacted, evolved into a new genre of literature emphasising the impact of the nineteenth-century, though in essence, its lineage could be traced back to the poetic pastoralisms of Virgil.¹⁸ Typically, William Morris's 'Nowhere', a Medieval bucolic haven transposed into twenty-first century England, provided a symbolic *ébauche*, if not a blueprint, for a metropolitan intelligentsia obsessed by urban malaise and the 'Condition of England'.¹⁹ Though such artistic sentiments were not obviously connected with the fortunes of agriculture beyond rural out-migration, both aesthetic and practical responses similarly recognized the life affirming, psychical qualities redolent in the English countryside.²⁰

Of pre-eminence to this thesis, however, are the political and economically inspired schemes to resuscitate agriculture and regenerate rural life. This second strand of 'back to the land' philosophy, embracing a plurality of land reform crusades, promoted the benefits of small farming and the break up of landlordist oligopolies. Placing emphasis on the health of the nation and a patriotic sense of correcting social injustices, these apparently mundane and frequently esoteric campaigns became embroiled in intellectual definitions of England's symbolic construction, stressing the importance of land in the shaping of the nation, even in an urban-industrial age. Transcending traditional ideological boundaries, the urge for the re-distribution of landownership originated in the belief that the controlling patriarchal classes had failed farming, prolonged depression and contributed to increasing disaffection amongst the rural labouring population. Through the reconstruction of English landownership principles, perceived injustices could be confronted. To combat inequality, reformist agendas frequently proposed an extensive system of small holdings and allotments.

Controversially, the accepted judgement that mid-nineteenth-century 'High Farming' had been the 'Golden Age' of agriculture was challenged on the grounds that the prosperity of the age failed to filter down to the labouring classes. For a century after 1770, the era had been a 'Golden Age' solely for the landlord.²¹ Small holding campaigns sought inspiration, instead, from the fifteenth century, the poetic era of William Langland's *Piers Ploughman*, when patriarchal control over land rights was weakest and peasant farming most widespread.²² The love of the Middle Ages, the cult of the Medieval, is one of the more enduring traits of western culture, particularly

as cultural dislocation increased the urge to seek out 'real' roots. As Umberto Eco states, 'it seems that people like the Middle Ages'.²³ Rejecting a patriarchal view of the agrarian past in favour of a more egalitarian treatment that refused to exclude the labouring classes, Thorold Rogers enkindled much revolutionary fervour through his suggestion that the period from the 1381 Peasant's Revolt until the first decade of the sixteenth century was the most prosperous period for peasants across England, prior to their eventual demise and incorporation into the labourer and urban classes.²⁴ The prominent Socialist, Henry Hyndman, described Medieval England as inhabited by 'perhaps the most vigorous, freedom loving set of men the world ever saw'. Their reformist invective was derived from the historic protests that arose during the ensuing enclosure movement and its 'wrenching social dislocation'.²⁵ This dialogue between the past and present, recreating an agrarian *modus operandi* of peasant proprietorship, symbolised the first attempt to reconstitute the rural milieu within its own semiological myth of individual toil and subsistence, an undoubtedly idealised vision of Medieval England. Contrary to Patrick Wright's recent assertion that agricultural reformists remained pragmatic 'anti-idyllic Utopians', Radical theorists such as Jesse Collings, Sir John Green (co-founder, with Collings, of the pro-smallholder Rural Labourers' League), C.A. Fyffe and even Prince Pyotr Kropotkin, though eschewing the conventional Picturesque vision of repose and stationary time, succumbed to more realistic, yet still consciously abstract idyllic reconstructions.²⁶ Montague Fordham could provide an enlightened economic critique on the rural exodus and the need to repopulate the countryside, yet still referred to land, a commodity in fiscal reasoning, as 'Mother Earth'.²⁷ Even within technical farming literature or the prosaic language of a Select Committee there is recognition of disrupted spiritual resonance and a personalised and peaceful future vision was hoped for.

*The magic of ownership, referred to by Arthur Young, which turns sand into gold, is appealed to, and it is pointed out that even when the small cultivator is only a tenant, he is profuse of his own labour, and can thus obtain results which would be impossible to the large farmer.*²⁸

Chapter Seven: Reawakening England: Peasant Proprietorship and the 'new departure'

'7.1 Three Acres and a Cow' - the development of the small holding idea.

The implementation of small holding schemes at the end of the nineteenth-century represented an awakening to England's more egalitarian rural past, a return to the *ancien régime* of noble yeoman and peasant. This democratic reading of history was manipulated to propound alternative routes to progress based on 'real', that meant peasant, successes of the past.²⁹ An inherent progressiveness in small holdings, which was not evident to agrarian technocrats, offered a 'new departure' from the 'dark' period of enclosure and the encroachment of ruthlessly competitive capitalist farm economies.³⁰ Throughout the late-Victorian era, espousal of a nationalist re-assertion of the past through small holdings was most audibly offered by Jesse Collings.

During a parliamentary debate at the end of 1884 on the "Peasant Proprietary and Acquisition of Land by Occupiers Bill" Jesse Collings claimed it was every Englishman's right to 'three acres and a cow'.³¹ Collings delivered one of the most famous and durable phrases of the late nineteenth-century, a cogent 'soundbite' defining the campaign for equality through land reform. Despite the simplicity of his statement, however, a clear and concise delineation of the physical constitution of small holdings and the associated allotment plan proved elusive. This confusion by politicians and the wider public reflected, not only an ignorance of the rural condition, but more significantly, the differing ideologies that appropriated the small farm as a conduit to a future, better England. Thus small holdings could range from less than an acre upwards to one hundred acres. They could be owned outright by the resident farmer, controlled by the state or rented from innovative and informed landowners, depending upon political persuasions. The farm could equally be a self-contained economic unit or a symbolic reversion back to the historic cottage and common land system prevalent in Medieval England.³²

Agrarian 'back to the land' schemes were based around the implementation of two types of land holding: allotments and small farms. The differences between them represented more than size. Allotments facilitated the continued existence of the labourer on the land, while the small holding, requiring greater investment of capital, offered an opportunity for labourers to become self-sufficient in direct comparison with the peasant proprietors of Europe. Jesse Collings, giving evidence before the Select Committee on small holdings, offered the following definition.

*An allotment is to be a piece of land held and cultivated by a man who reckons to gain his livelihood by weekly wages, and who cultivates his land in his spare time with the primary objective of supplying his family with potatoes, vegetables and other articles for his own consumption.*³³

The cottage allotment, generally not exceeding a quarter of an acre, perhaps provided a more tangible reminder of the ameliorative powers of the soil than the small holding, which was exposed to the volatile nature of agrarian markets.³⁴ Provision of an allotment would, in theory, not only diminish the precarious position of the agricultural labourer in a variable employment market through ensuring the ready supply of comestibles, but also guaranteed maximum labour contact with the soil.³⁵ Thus urges to migrate to the city could be eliminated. The successful ownership of a small allotment offered greater self-worth through toil, realising a series of discernible benefits for the labourer in terms of disposable income and a reduced dependency on paternal good will. Ideally, prudent labourers capable of maximising allotment potential could, if he or she held the freehold, acquire additional land and enhance their status to that of an independent small holder.³⁶

The small holding was an altogether larger affair which not only required a more substantial acreage, but also, full-time maintenance. Two categories of small holdings were favoured with stress placed on *ownership*. The first class of holding would re-invent of the peasant proprietor tradition for a late nineteenth-century agrarian context, extracting a living solely from the land through produce retail to towns. Alternatively, the second type of cultivator would only be partially employed on the small holding, maintaining an income extraneous to agriculture usually through other village based occupations such as shopkeeper, wheelwright or publican. For the supporters of agrarian small holdings, it was the former class upon which the agricultural revival would be based. Unfortunately, it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which farming was combined with other activities. Historians have tended to re-inforce the statistical trend of the era to disregard dual occupationalist from agricultural accounts.³⁷ Critically, however, small holdings provided an elevating function. Lord Lansdowne, addressing the sixth annual meeting of the Rural Labourers' League, asserted that the small holding was not an overgrown allotment, rather a facility to convert the labourer into an independent small farmer.³⁸ The report of the 1890 Select Committee on Small Holdings suggested small farms should be graduated upwards from cottage gardens to holdings of 50 acres (a ceiling adopted in the pivotal 1892 Small Holdings Act) though historians have tended to define peasant holdings in unit sizes beneath one hundred acres.³⁹ The Allotments and Small Holdings Act of 1908 did offer a degree of clarification stating that a small farm could be understood to mean 'an agricultural holding which exceeds one acre, and either does not exceed fifty acres, or if exceeding fifty acres, is at the date of sale or letting of an annual value for the purposes of income tax not exceeding £100'.⁴⁰ In practice, the dimensions of a small holding were determined as much by the character of the soil: thus, the greater the fertility, the larger the holding.⁴¹

Sceptics of small farming disputed the capability of three acres to offer a sustainable existence, particularly in response to bad harvests of a magnitude comparable with those of 1874-79. Mr J. Standring, a small farmer from Epworth in Lincolnshire, in giving evidence to the small holding Select Committee dismissed the idea that a profitable existence could be sustained on a holding of five acres, advancing a figure of nearer ten acres to ensure a degree of 'comfort' without depending on an outside wage.⁴² Further doubt was expressed about the ability of the average labourer, especially in southern England, to stock and cultivate even three acres of pasture or half an acre of arable land.⁴³

7.2 The Original Theft - The Failure of Farming and the Landlord-Blame Thesis

Mindful of simplifying an essentially disunited campaign, a broad anti-landowning consensus developed, providing the focus of late nineteenth-century rural protest at farm failure. Within a "landlord blame" ideological framework, the invented tradition of paternalistic landlordism, providing financial support and the benevolent social control to enable efficient production, was rejected. Landowners and the semi-feudal mode of authority which supported them, were charged with a betrayal of agriculture through poor fiscal management and a reluctance to support innovative methods of farming reform, most obviously the development of peasant holdings.⁴⁴ Regarding the fertility of the land as a natural, and formerly constitutional right, the anarchist thinker Pyotr Kropotkin argued that the restrictive farming culture of the tenant working within strict economic controls enforced by land agents, reduced the productivity of the land by between four and ten times.⁴⁵ Williamson and Bellamy comment that 'the whole fabric of the English landscape embodied the tenurial hegemony of the landed elite...it was shaped by their aesthetic preferences, their economic interests and their leisure pursuits'.⁴⁶ Increasingly the inability of English farmers to confront overseas imports directed attention towards the restrictive nature of tenurial rights. An incensed Boyd Kinnear wrote in 1879

*It naturally comes to be asked whether it is not possible that a different form of tenure might not infuse such new life into cultivation of the soil as to make it unnecessary to pay these enormous sums to the foreigner for the means of subsistence.*⁴⁷

Chamberlain's corollary that 'few hands' controlling the soil were the real origin of agricultural depression proved a popular conclusion amongst reformists, both utilitarians and those intent to vitiate capitalism to further their own political ambitions.

The 'land question' informing the anti-landlordist diatribe, represented a continually evolving pursuit to secure the protection of farming against challenges to

its status throughout the nineteenth-century.⁴⁸ Roy Douglas suggests at certain critical times, the 'land question' and a rejection of the *status quo* has been re-asserted in response to the perceived incapacity of the land to meet production requirements.⁴⁹ During the first half of the last century, the question focused upon the levels of prices and rents, in the depression succeeding the Napoleonic Wars. Throughout the era of High Farming the question revealed an obsessional fear of future foreign competition subsequent to the removal of Protectionist trade barriers. Initially dominated by the more severe and potentially revolutionary situation in Ireland, the 'land question' during the final quarter of the nineteenth-century became enmeshed within the highly complex issue of land *tenure*. The Irish 'Land War' scenario, was hastily transposed into identical debates for an English context. Landlordism was portrayed as inherently nefarious and anachronistic. The 'landlord-blame' approach attempted 'to bring Englishmen (as the agriculturalists of Ireland and the crofters of Scotland have been brought already) face to face with the insufferable evils of landlordism and its attendant powers for the oppression and enslavement of tenants'.⁵⁰ An archaic polemic was revived, citing a Norman-led apostasy, destroying established communal property rights by robbing land from the masses. Alfred Russel Wallace's impassioned vitriol against modern landlordism, its origins in force and maintenance 'by confiscation and unjust legislation', proved seductive.⁵¹ A common trait of the 'back to the land' movement was the accent placed on the continued struggle against repressive land ownership since the middle-ages, adding to the campaign a sense of historical legitimacy, rooted in the protests of the past. Forgotten infractions against entrenched structures of power by insurrectionists such as Wat Tyler and the Kent farm labourer rebellion of 1381, were rescued from an historical silence. One of William Morris's best-known narratives *A Dream of John Ball* was written as a celebratory eulogy to the infamous co-conspirator of Tyler.⁵² Their crusade and eventual demise represented a symbolic assertion of aristocratic power. More moderate politicians like Jesse Collings were inspired, calling Tyler a 'great historical figure' as well as a 'patriot and born leader of men'.⁵³

Through the anti-landowning stance, a conviction that *true* Englishmen were rooted to the soil was repeatedly affirmed. For reformists, this bond with the land had been perverted and replaced with an inequitable servitude to rapacious autocrats. Small holdings were seized as symbols of resistance, a physical representation of emancipated status. In an attempt to attribute blame explicitly on large landowners, a doctrine of 'original theft' was propounded. Making obvious theological parallels, the inherent malfeasance of accumulation and denial, the 'original theft', was conceptualised and lambasted by Karl Marx and John Ruskin.⁵⁴ Ruskin, in the preface to *Munera Pulveris* indicted William the Conqueror with the original theft of

land, '...but that theft by force was a mere trifle in comparison with the theft by constitutional methods which has succeeded it, and which is daily proceeding'.⁵⁵ The progressive concentration of land ownership dictated the pattern of yeoman and peasant subduction from the soil through enclosure and farm aggregation, an insinuation even upheld by the Report of the Select Committee on Small Holdings, a governmental enquiry established in 1889 to investigate the potential of supporting small holding schemes.⁵⁶ Echoing allegations of a 'withering of race' and 'spiritual debasement' that had illuminated the racial aspect of the Condition of Rural England discourse, the landlord-blame campaign attempted to prove how sponsorship of mass land eviction had failed farming through the erosion of its vitality, expressed traditionally by the intensive cultivation of the peasant. Concurrently, the peasant proprietor was reduced to inevitable pauperism and the less-esteemed status of farm labourer.⁵⁷

The erasure of the peasant destroyed an important productive bond. Collings recognized that ownership of land engendered a greater desire to cultivate efficiently and effectively; if the results were tangible, the encouragement to work remained intact. However a divorce of owners from the land tainted this attachment, creating a culture of decay and neglect of which abandoned acres and tumbledown fields were a direct result. Perhaps the most obvious mediation of this dereliction of social value in land was through the thousands of acres held for leisure and gaming. For some recreational land was the most abhorrent manifestation of the evils of landownership. 'Millions of acres', raged a United Committee on the Taxation of Land Values pamphlet, 'capable of supporting a prosperous peasantry, are held idle partly for purposes of sport or pleasure, partly from foolish caprice or old habit'.⁵⁸ One estate near Thetford of approximately 100,000 acres was devoted almost entirely to the preserving of pheasants.⁵⁹ Huge areas of unoccupied land reserved for shooting and blood sports, juxtaposed to communities where pauperism remained rife represented an anathema to those who believed in natural human rights and carried the loaded political implication that the labouring classes were placed beneath game birds in terms of status, paralleling debates instigated by the Condition of Rural England movement.

Through the preservation of recreational land, the old aristocratic order were accused of inhibiting the process of agrarian reconstruction. A general acceptance persisted that agricultural depression could be alleviated as a consequence of an increase in production but highly productive land remained labour-starved at a critical time when a prolonged rural diaspora had over sixty years halved the rural labour force from 2,300,000 to 988,000 people. The perceived spiritual balance of the labourer was earned through toil and the fruits of the soil could only be harvested

through hard work, therefore the land, with its beauty and fertility could be enjoyed, but not indulged in.

For some prominent critics, the culture of decay was transposed into methods of estate management based upon intimidation, complacency and declining investment. Francis Channing asserted the myopic financial planning of landowners remained a chief contributor to the betrayal of English farming. Agricultural resilience had been crushed by the 'short-sighted policy of the owner who...in general pushed the loss from himself to his tenant as long as he could.'⁶⁰ It was Channing's belief that

...the evidence of this commission [Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression 1896] has thrown a flood of light over the defects and perversions of the law and the fallacies - wilful or unconscious - which have led to the economic robbery of the men who should be rewarded for enriching their landlords as well as themselves.

Special dispensations to landowners weakened the fragile security that farming offered. A legal system that deferred to aristocratic control allowed landowners to seize the 'goods and chattels' of tenants, enacting eviction orders without proper notice, for what were little more than simple cases of poverty such as rental defaulting.⁶¹ Though most landowners usually offered some degree of compassion and rent reductions or abatements did testify to this, the threat of force coupled with the paranoia and self-doubt of farmers entrenched in depression naturally encouraged destabilisation. The fundamental problem appeared to have been the burden of heavy debts imposed by a system of tenure that prevented farmers from exploiting potential capabilities of the soil.⁶² Estate liabilities became a theme of two Royal Commissions on depression, though the issue, dominated by the landowning perspective, neglected the concern regarding the accrual of tenant farmer debt.⁶³ Yet counter productively, estate arrears not only 'incriminated' the patriarchal class against accusations of negligence, but questioned the whole *raison d'être* of concentrated landownership, the implication being debt disputed the efficacy of landowners to agriculture. Arguments in favour of a new agricultural infrastructure were further validated by accumulated rents and diverted profits from those who worked the land. Contemporary methods of land ownership accentuated wasted capital, simultaneously preserving an unnecessarily hierarchical system. Barham Zincke neatly summarized the problem.

Nowhere else is the whole of the agricultural land of a country in the hands of a small class who are paid by other people for permission to cultivate it and who cultivate it, as superiors of the employment of capital, with hired

*labour. It is also the dearest method the world has ever seen of cultivating the soil of a country.*⁶⁴

William Bear, a highly regarded farming expert of the day suggested only land reform, and small holdings in particular, would enable the increased flow of agrarian capital, redirected funds from those who would invest in cultivation.⁶⁵

Property law, with out-moded concepts of primogeniture and entail, increasingly restricted access to the land. The issue was further muddied by a reluctance from landowners to accept that all land should be common and that private ownership was natural law. Baron Stanley of Alderley, refused to entertain the Radical postulatium that all land had once been communally owned, suggesting, as an example, that small parcels of land held by roadsides 'never *belonged* to the public, but *belong* to the lord of the manor'.⁶⁶ The patriarchal system needed to be shattered, and a new law of restrictive ownership engaged. For some, the ensuing life on the land would be based upon communes and craft revivalism; for others, and they are of most interest to us here, a system of agrarian small holdings would replace the discredited landlord-tenant relationship.

7.3 Jesse Collings and the Reconstruction of the Rural

7.3.1 The Emergence of Agrarian Land Reform

The late Victorian agrarian 'back to the land' movement represents a sprawling, tangled web of cure-alls and counter-statements remaining a huge and varied subject to embrace. Of interest to this thesis, is a practical aspect of this rural impulse, namely the legislative campaign waged by Jesse Collings M.P. and the organisation he created to promote his ruralist ideology, the Rural Labourers' League. For Collings, the 'rural question' was the single most important problem facing late nineteenth-century England, and for over thirty years, with incredible immutability, he attempted to convince Parliament of the centrality of land reform for the future safeguarding of English idiosyncrasies as well as the central role in the preservation of agriculture.⁶⁷ The pivotal component within his 'back to the land' philosophy was a belief that concentrated land ownership destroyed agriculture through the implementation of restrictive semi-feudal laws, ultimately encouraging the historic population shift from the soil.⁶⁸ This ideological tenet conformed to the eclectic theories and reformist policies of the Radical Liberal Unionists led by Joseph Chamberlain and their obsession with conserving agriculture as the stimulus to social betterment.⁶⁹ Collings acknowledged the existence of a disparate range of reformist schemes, but for him 'free trade in land' was paramount, enabling the labouring classes (Liberal Radicals were less concerned with tenant farmers, who in any case

had their own special interest group, The Farmers Alliance) to purchase land with ease and little expense.⁷⁰

Jesse Collings provides a useful study not least because he is more closely identified with a reconstruction of the rural environment than any other figure.⁷¹ He is also, probably, the most mis-represented. His voice on the subject was authoritative, enabling him to address Section F of the British Association in 1907 on the subject of small holdings and speak on the philosophy of small farming at the annual banquet of the French Agricultural Society in 1908, presided over by the Marquis de Vogüé.⁷² A simplistic reading of his work based upon the degree of press coverage, would even suggest he provided the definitive vision of restoring people to the soil. Collings possessed an awareness of the social question behind economic failure and thus appealed to all classes of Englishmen and women that the fate of agriculture impinged directly upon wider national issues such as unemployment and urban overcrowding.⁷³ His attraction lay partly in a non-revolutionary stance committed to the passive attainment of an owner occupying democracy. Unwilling land reformists saw him as a compromise solution in opposition to the drastic legislative proposals of the Socialists.⁷⁴

Of interest to us here, however, is the geography behind his campaign. Specifically there are three issues arising from Collings's work. Firstly, there is an assumption that some spaces were more English than others. Apart from the obvious urban/rural dichotomy explored previously we find that certain rural areas in England were closer to the essence of Englishness than others, reflecting a conceptual need to problematise the essentialist notion of uniform English rural geography.⁷⁵ As such, they were appropriated as cherished environments and their apparent threat from depression and the need for reform was asserted over other areas. This campaign to construct the countryside idea was founded upon a principle of preservation and the maintenance of peculiarly English spaces rather than propelling rural locales along the road of uniform technological progression, with emphasis placed on the *local* and a parochial geography that consciously celebrated the organising function of the village both throughout history and within a future rural vision. A second geographical concern revolves around a notion of utility as an aesthetic delineation within productive landscapes and the belief that 'idle space' was the antithesis of an unstated, but assumed, English agrarian work ethic. Frequently, Collings, in allusion to the merciless spread of tumbledown, would make reference to the desert spectacle of abandoned acres.⁷⁶ A final geographic theme detectable in Collings's formulations is a celebration of the soil as invigorating. Close contact through intensive small holding cultivation inspired a sense of esteem for the individual that could only improve the national well-being as a whole. Collings shared this conceptual



Photo. H. Y. Whittell & Sons Ltd.

Plate 4: Rt. Hon. Jesse Collings M.P.

combination of agriculture with the assertion of a patriotic space with others. Indeed, Collings demonstrated little interest in agricultural science or technology and his schemes make deliberate attempts to provide spiritual elevation and social reorganisation as evidenced by his racial anxieties.⁷⁷

7.3.2 'The Right Honourable member for three acres and a cow'

A biography of Collings's life and work reveals insights into his personal philosophy. Most obviously, his small holding idealism clearly evoked a romantic rendition of his mother's peasant background, reflecting the common Victorian trait of spiritual longing for lost rustic roots. The descent of her family from yeomen to farm labourers provided the inspiration behind his struggle for land reform.⁷⁸ Jesse Collings was born on 9 January 1831 at Littleham-cum-Exmouth, Devon. The son of a bricklayer, he received a modest education before moving into the ironmonger trade, re-locating to Birmingham in the early 1860s, initially as an ironmonger's clerk, but swiftly rising to partnership level.⁷⁹ Collings's route to agricultural reform was not an obvious one. His original concerns were for free education and improved school facilities.⁸⁰ In 1867 he joined the Birmingham Education Society (which later became the National Education League) and in 1868 he was elected a local councillor for the Edgbaston ward. Through local political activism Collings gradually became embroiled in the rising labourer discontent that led directly to the organised protests of the 1870s. Joining forces with other Warwickshire radicals, most notably Joseph Arch, he helped form the National Agricultural Labourers Union (N.A.L.U.) in 1872, addressing the inaugural meeting where a crowd estimated at 2-3,000 attended. The primary aims of the Union were to raise wages, ensure the provision of better rural education and encourage closer contact between a recreated peasant class and the soil. Contact with the Union led Collings into drafting a series of ideas propounding small holdings as a method to dissipate the 'national disgrace' of rural pauperism.⁸¹ Concerned by the absence of an effective outlet for the rural voice and the receding national importance of agriculture, Collings set about raising the rural profile to extirpate urban indifference.⁸² In *The Radical Programme*, Collings related the impossibility to accurately 'describe the privations of the labourer', yet evidently he felt personally more qualified than most to proclaim that rural penury was as real an issue as urban malaise, if only because he was repeatedly praised as the saviour of the countryside both at national level and by labourers during his many small-scale public engagements.⁸³ One of several such examples comes from an annual labourers' supper in Heckington, near Sleaford in Lincolnshire, where a Mr Charles Sharpe affirmed the grass-roots view of many, that Collings was the true champion of the

labourer cause, stating that '...for years past, when other people were asleep, Mr Collings had been calling the attention of the public to the necessity for fixing the agricultural labourer to the soil'.⁸⁴ Despite Collings's commendation of Arch's efforts with the National Agricultural Labourers Union and acknowledgement that he was a 'fine representative of an English peasant', the relationship soured somewhat following the Liberal Unionist split with Collings attacking Arch's reluctance to defend the labourer cause and associated promotion of small holdings once entering Parliament on the Gladstonian side of the Liberal Party.⁸⁵ Furthermore, resistance to N.A.L.U. activities from the powerful landlords increasingly alienated 'three acres and a cow' as a method to secure people on the land. Collings, in a response redolent in political self-preservation, distanced himself from the Union to pursue other approaches to publicise his agrarian philosophy.

There was a certain inevitability in Jesse Collings seeking election to Parliament, as he was now identified with a growing band of Radical Liberal politicians from the Birmingham area including Joseph Chamberlain.⁸⁶ In 1880, Collings was returned as the member of Parliament for Ipswich where he held the seat until 1886, when he was unseated following a ballot rigging scandal from which he was swiftly absolved.⁸⁷ Later that year, Collings became the elected representative for the Bordesley division of Birmingham, the seat he retained until shortly before his death, though he rarely attended the House of Commons in later life, invariably because of ill health. Once in Parliament, Collings seized an opportunity to mould his peasant proprietary vision into some sort of legal reality whilst disabling previous legislation moved to support landed interests. Previous attempts to return land back to the rightful (read peasant) owners had been cursory and negligible, a point Collings re-iterated twenty years later in *Land Reform*, 'the few and stinted efforts made to give back land to the rural population are in marked contrast to the continuous energy shown in depriving them of it'.⁸⁸ On 25 August 1881, he stated his intentions by tabling a question on land reform and the need to resurrect a peasant class, reduce pauperism, increase production and arrest rural population decline, thus signalling much of his political agenda for the following four decades. Collings's incipient legislative assault came one year later with the passing of the Allotment Extensions Act (1882). The remit of this legislation was to over-ride local charity land trustee control to ensure under utilized land in a parish could be subdivided into allotments for the benefit of the poor. Collings's optimistic summary of the original Bill placed before Parliament was '...it gave the labourer, for the first time, certain legal rights in the land, though only to rent it'.⁸⁹ In reality the Bill was rendered unworkable by an unwillingness of charity trustees to relinquish land. In an obvious challenge to the trustees, Collings formed the Allotments Extension Association in December 1883 to

provide small plots for labourers to supplement any farm wages.⁹⁰ Collings was heading up a political cul-de-sac with the Allotments Extension Association as his small holding drive became too closely allied with the impracticalities of the legislation, most notably its lack of any compulsory powers, the absence of which extended the impasse between reforms and landowners.⁹¹ However, his next significant political manoeuvre was to firmly secure the centrality of English land reform within political debate. On 27 January 1886 Collings instigated the downfall of Lord Salisbury's Conservative administration through the appending of an amendment to the Irish Coercion Bill reformulating existing small holding legislation for England and Wales in the process. Support for the amendment enforced a general election which the Liberal party won.⁹² Restored to power, Gladstone promised the issue of small holding construction would be promoted under comprehensive new legislation. But Collings had not anticipated internal resentment to his reformist beliefs which directly compelled nearly one hundred Liberals to abstain or even vote against the amendment, as evidenced by Lord Hartington and Viscount Goschen siding with the Conservatives. Increasingly, Gladstone vacillated on the 'land question' and eventually relegated reform in favour of pursuing the Irish Home Rule issue. Despairing at this betrayal, Chamberlainite Radicals, including Collings, exploited the situation to suit their own political ambitions by switching allegiance to the other side of the House.⁹³ The illustration overleaf, taken from *Punch* (13 February 1886) satirises Gladstone's dilemma, with Joseph Chamberlain's yeoman figure instructing him to go the way of land reform, while his conscience tells him to favour Irish Home Rule. Officially, the Liberal split was impelled by the abandonment of the small holding cause by Gladstone, but the underlying subtext was Chamberlain's drive for leadership, with the issue of land reform providing convenient provocation.⁹⁴

It would require undoubted political naïvety to suggest that Collings's transfer to the Tory benches was motivated purely by a utilitarian obsession to secure ameliorative agrarian legislation.⁹⁵ However the leader article from the *Rural World* of 23 November 1889 loyally defended this seemingly illogical action of placing faith in the party responsible for the abuses he sought to reverse, contending that Collings was forced to switch allegiance because of Gladstone's obstructionist political manoeuvring towards land reform.⁹⁶

*He is a Unionist Liberal from sheer compulsion. If he had remained a separatist there would have been no Allotments Act [1887] and no other legislation except that which the selfishness of Irishmen insist upon.*⁹⁷

What this statement further reveals is the simmering resentment of Collings towards the Irish for selfishly securing their own small holding laws then eventually denying



AT THE CROSS ROADS.

FOR THE FUTURE "HOLD THIS BE YOUR ROAD, MASTER!"

Figure 7: Cartoon from *Punch* Reflecting Gladstone's Dilemma

the English their land right.⁹⁸ 'No English need apply' was an assessment by the Rural Labourers' League of the Governmental antipathy to the English labourer. Gladstone's government was charged with a capitulation to Irish demands while consequently neglecting 'the real and most pressing needs of the English people'.⁹⁹ This sense of bitterness had not been evident in Collings's early Parliamentary career when he spoke to an audience in Ipswich in December 1880, later published by the Birmingham Reform League, on the need for the English to rally behind the Irish labourer and support their land war.¹⁰⁰ Despite a lack of conviction for Tory politics, Collings never left the Unionist side of the House and the degree to which his policies were infiltrated by Conservative thinking requires examination. Some legislative success was recorded in the remaining years which would have been denied without Conservative support, in addition to securing a Select Committee inaugurated to investigate the viability of small holdings, the conclusions from which enabled an unopposed passage of the influential 1892 Small Holdings Act, which Rider Haggard in *Rural England* referred to as the Jesse Collings Act.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, the failure of a number of other, equally reformist amendments suggests that Collings was something of a mouse to the Tory tom-cat, allowed to run free when rural labouring votes, over which Collings had undeniably persuasive powers, were coveted.¹⁰² The importance of the Conservative government to react, favourably, to the Radicals in their midst was not lost on James Long. He urged many Conservative landowners to accept for the benefit of agriculture and the nation as a whole, some measure of reform had to be taken.¹⁰³ But real evidence of the influence of Tory opinion on Collings resided in his diminished insistence of the need for compulsory purchase powers to enact local schemes following the 'conversion' to Unionism, in effect making any legislative proposal toothless in the face of a concerted obstructionist effort by local landowners.¹⁰⁴

Despite the difficulty in codifying Collings's various political manifestations, his resistance to established divisions was undeniably strong, providing another version of the Ruralist political maverick along the lines of Rider Haggard, a one-issue statesman willing to throw in his lot with anybody prepared to listen regardless of party affiliations. He was explicit in a yearning for all ideologies to unite to protect the rural environment, declaring at a protest rally in Netley Castle in August 1892, that all political banners should be 'thrown aside' in a reversion back to the old system of 'measures, not men'.¹⁰⁵ Seemingly, Collings subscribed to the notion that the rural was some how beyond the ideology of both the orthodox Left and Right. Ideological matrimony defined the political stance of the Rural Labourers' League which possessed its own land policy quite distinct from the manifestos of the major political parties. The idea of an Agricultural Party with Collings as a figurehead was even

mooted, placing people in Parliament 'whose connection with the soil was intimate and personal'.¹⁰⁶ For Collings at least, the viability of the idea lay in the appeal of agriculture to all classes and the opportunity to unite the disparate rural associations that fought for their own special interests. In a sense Collings argued the countryside transcended class. Apart from reflecting his unease of sitting with the Tories, the assertion of a Ruralist philosophy hinted at the failure of all agricultural associations to influence policy without consequently resorting to towing various ideological lines and perpetuating traditional confrontational, rather than consensus politics. Clearly, Collings was aware of the need to organise rural interests to preserve the remaining fragments of the national mainstay industry.

7.4 *Catshill: Model or Myth*

Catshill, Worcestershire was the first popular example of a specifically agrarian small holding colony. With the possible exception of Major Poore's personal scheme at Winterslow in Wiltshire, Catshill was the most famous example where the principles of *small farming* were mapped out upon the English landscape. The village endured immense destitution following the collapse of the nail industry. With many labour opportunities in the rapidly expanding industrial areas of Birmingham and the Black Country, roughly ten miles north and east, population decline and the loss of community spirit were to be expected. Catshill offered unprecedented success under the difficult terms of the Collings-inspired Small Holdings Act of 1892. This labour-intensive settlement possessed a special piquancy for believers in the innate husbandry skills of the Englishman or woman because the Catshill small holders were largely drawn from the local nail making industry, which in its traditional domestic form had all but died, and not farming.¹⁰⁷

On Thursday, 19 July 1894, a sizeable crowd gathered at the Board School, Catshill, a small village immediately north of Bromsgrove. This meeting, convened by Worcestershire County Council following a petition signed by men desirous of land, initiated the construction of perhaps the most discussed small holding colony of the period, formulated upon the principles of the 1892 Small Holding Act.¹⁰⁸ The conclusion reached by the assembly chairman, Mr J.W. Willis-Bund, was that the demand for small holdings was *bona-fide*, being the only response to 2,000 hand bills issued by the Council to promote the potential of the 1892 Act.¹⁰⁹ Using legislation influenced, if not introduced into Parliament, by Jesse Collings, Worcestershire County Council created the authoritative physical expression of 'back to the land' philosophy in the form of an experimental peasant colony. Catshill was quickly inducted into land reformist iconology, symbolic not of scientific modernism and technology but the humanity of farming and the restoration of agriculture through re-

organisation. The symbolic meaning of this labour-intensive solution possessed a special piquancy for believers in the innate husbandry skills of the Englishman or woman, those who advocated the return of the townsman to the soil, because the Catshill small holders were largely drawn from the local nailing industry, which in its traditional domestic form had all but died. Later replacement tenants originated from more diverse occupations such as a school-master in the case of Herbert Watts or market gardener and shopkeepers as typified by William King, indicating the broad appeal of Catshill.¹¹⁰ There is a need to explore the ideological usurpation of a locally-formulated plan into the classic national model of reform and the resultant identification of the scheme as a return to peasant proprietorship.

Following the application for £4,800 from the Local Government Board, Worcestershire County Council bought Woodrow Farm, a 147 acre holding from Matthias Rollason, a Birmingham bootmaker, at approximately £33 per acre with the intention to divide the land up into 32 unequally sized small holdings of roughly two to six acres.¹¹¹ This fulfilled Collings's criteria that the conversion to a small holding system would be based upon evolution rather than revolution.¹¹² Woodrow Farm had been a mixed farming unit of nine fields of variable size ranging from a three acre portion of arable on Rye Hills to the forty acre Large Meadow, the original boundaries of which shaped the internal division into the small plots. (Figures 8 and 9).

Supplanting Woodrow Farm was a small aggregation of holdings, which though not farmed upon a collective principle, were anticipated to bond into a new peasant community under the careful direction of the county council. There is no doubt that the council influenced the cultivation process with encouragement to grow cash crops such as fruit in common with the successful market gardening production of the nearby Vale of Evesham. Subsequent to subdivision a number of applicants were interviewed by the County Small Holding Committee, though it took two years of protracted negotiations to let out or sell all the holdings, a problem provoked by numerous difficulties in securing the necessary funds for the 20% down-payment by potential small holders. Indeed, by 1896 just ten tenants were able to pay the 20% contribution and therefore become the purchasers of the land.¹¹³ Table 8 shows the full particulars regarding the size and cost of each holding.

Even in this early stage of the experiment, the appetite for consolidation was evident and suggestive that perhaps plot division had been too intensive, despite most holdings conforming to the 'three acres' ideal. James Powell, Alfred Wilkes, William Healey and Benjamin Waldron all held two holdings from the outset (Nos. 4/5; 15/26; 18/19 and 25/30 respectively) whilst Simeon Price managed to cultivate three holdings (Nos. 11, 12 and 27) at a total of approximately eleven acres.¹¹⁴ However,

Figure 8: Woodrow Farm Prior to Small Holding Conversion (c.1894)
Source: Plan drawn by County Road Surveyor Worcestershire County Council W.R.O. 224 102 BA 12

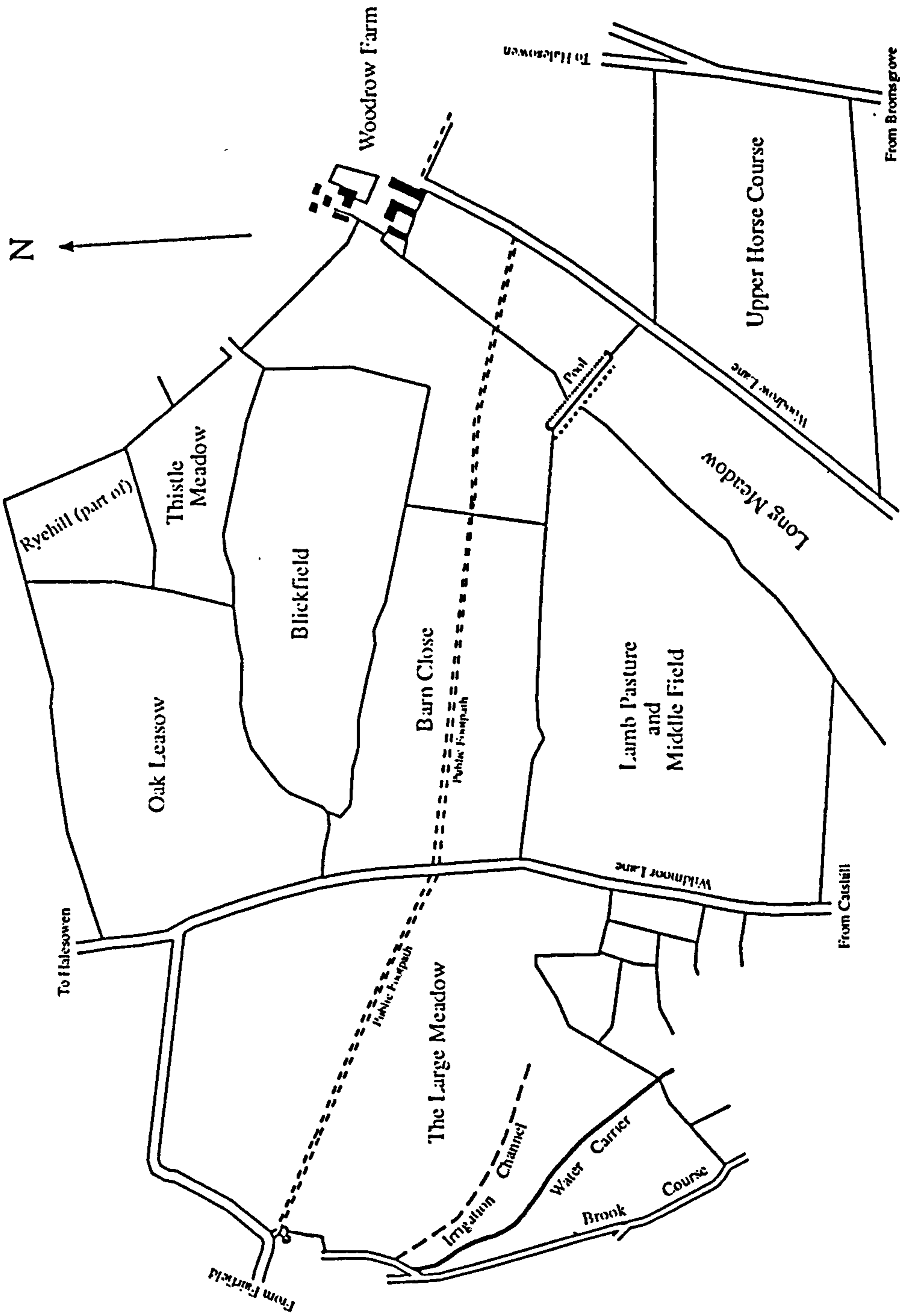
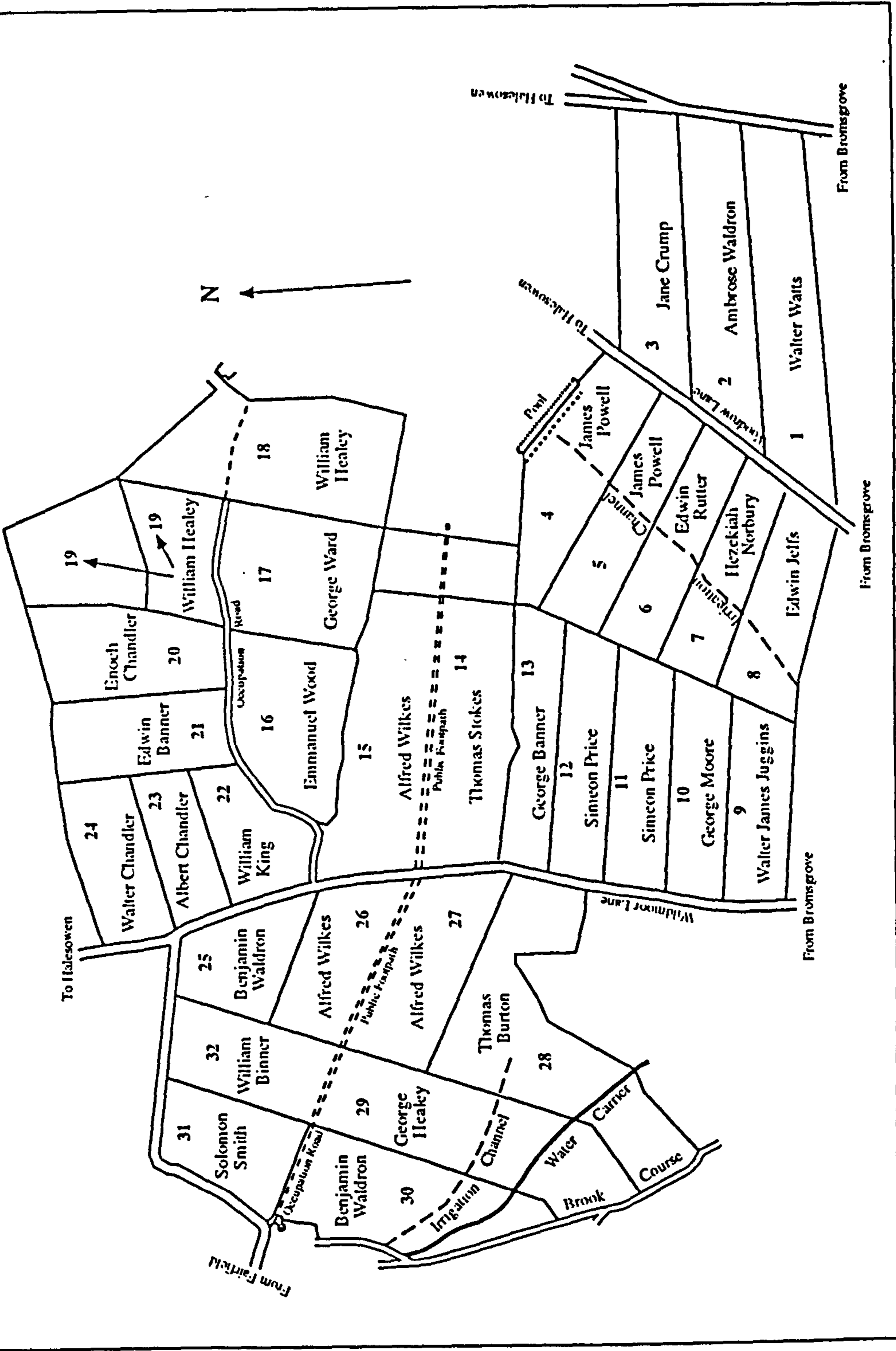


Figure 9: Land at Catshill divided into Small Holdings (c.1896)
 Source: Plan drawn by Worcestershire County Council W.R.O. 224 102 BA 580



these divisions were far from stable. Initially, during 1895, Simeon Price had hired the entire Oak Leasow field at 16 acres 3 roods and no perches.¹¹⁵ However, before the production of the first plan (Figure 9) Alfred Wilkes had succeeded in purchasing Holding No. 27, formerly the property of Simeon Price, while the latter possessed no land in the Oak Leasow.¹¹⁶ Anger persisted amongst the small holding community that County Council rules on land transfer were proving too restrictive. At a meeting of the Catshill Small Holding Association the issue was raised with regard to the expansion of existing small holdings. Ambrose Waldron, the chairman of the Association felt moved to write

*We are of the opinion it was the intention of the legislature that the small holder should be the stepping stone to something higher. But if your Council declines to allow transfers to be made, then your refusal will be like a millstone around the neck of the thrifty and industrious small holder.*¹¹⁷

In a sense a number of the arguments against restrictive cultivation imposed by agents of paternalistic landlords were transposed and rehearsed for the Catshill context. One critical difference, however, was that the Council could not readily afford to supply additional land, certainly not in close proximity to the colony. This fact received support from evidence collected by C.F.G. Masterman who visited Catshill some years after its inception. He established land in the vicinity of Catshill had been forced up in rental value from £15 per acre to £55 to £60 per acre in anticipation of an areal expansion of the scheme. Tenants that could afford to purchase their holdings outright were clustered in the south-eastern corner of Woodrow Farm in fields formerly known as Upper Horse Course and Long Meadow which compounded the land ration problem. This concentration was probably the consolidated outcome of those capable of purchase being the first 'colonisers' and thus initially directed into one area rather than dispersed across the colony site.¹¹⁸

The success of Catshill in an area formerly beset by industrial decline was conspicuous. Foul land was returned to a productive state and became profitable to the tune of £50,000 per annum, through the sale of small foodstuffs such as strawberries to the Birmingham market, according to evidence presented by Jesse Collings to Parliament on the 16th August 1907.¹¹⁹ Dismissing the entrenchment of agriculture in depression, Mr S. Thornley, the Clerk of Worcestershire County Council testified that financial rewards from small holdings were crucial to the future survival of traditional village communities, firmly believing that by providing individuals with land, they remained rooted to the soil. Thus material benefits could be translated and propagated as agents of social cohesiveness in a new, populous rural ideal.¹²⁰ Individual achievements from Catshill were numerous exhibited by separate

No. of Holding	Acreage			Purchase Money			Cash Payment on Completion			Residue			Repayments		
	A.	R.	P.	£.	S.	D.	£.	S.	D.	£.	S.	D.	£.	S.	D.
1	6	1	-	264	10	-	52	18	-	211	12	-	5	6	6
2	5	1	32	230	13	-	46	2	7	184	10	5	4	12	10
3	4	2	19	195	12	9	39	2	7	156	10	2	3	18	9
4	5	3	17	230	18	-	46	3	7	184	14	5	4	13	-
5	3	2	27	148	11	4	29	14	3	118	17	1	2	19	9
6	3	1	26	139	18	5	27	19	8	111	18	9	2	16	4
7	3	-	34	130	3	1	26	0	8	104	2	5	2	12	5
8	3	3	4	149	10	-	29	18	0	119	12	-	3	-	2
9	3	2	34	150	7	2	30	1	5	120	5	9	3	-	7
10	3	3	-	157	10	-	31	10	-	126	-	-	3	3	5
11	3	3	36	166	19	-	33	7	10	133	11	2	3	7	2
12	3	1	30	144	17	6	28	19	6	115	18	-	2	18	4
13	3	1	2	132	2	8	26	8	6	105	14	2	2	13	3
14	6	-	28	253	14	2	50	14	10	202	19	4	5	2	2
15	5	2	11	232	1	3	46	8	3	185	13	-	4	13	5
16	4	3	8	167	15	5	33	11	1	134	4	4	3	7	6
17	4	3	12	146	17	5	29	7	6	117	9	11	2	19	2
18	6	2	38	230	16	6	46	3	4	184	13	2	4	12	11
19	5	2	29	219	14	2	43	18	10	175	15	4	4	8	5
20	4	1	25	159	5	-	31	17	-	127	8	-	3	4	1
21	3	2	15	132	14	10	26	10	11	106	3	11	2	13	5
22	2	3	31	118	6	1	23	13	3	94	12	10	2	7	8
23	2	2	22	108	8	9	21	13	9	86	15	-	2	3	8
24	3	1	5	137	-	8	27	8	1	109	12	7	2	15	2
25	3	1	21	135	3	5	27	-	8	108	2	9	2	14	5
26	3	3	3	153	14	3	30	14	10	122	19	5	3	1	11
27	4	3	11	189	8	1	37	17	7	151	10	6	3	16	3
28	8	2	22	313	-	11	62	12	2	250	8	9	6	6	-
29	6	3	9	223	19	10	44	15	11	179	3	11	4	10	2
30	6	-	24	207	4	9	41	9	0	165	15	9	4	3	5
31	3	-	29	124	3	5	24	16	8	99	6	9	2	10	-
32	3	1	38	136	-	3	27	4	1	108	16	2	2	14	9
Total	145	1	2	5681	2	1	1126	4	4	4504	17	9	113	7	-

Table 8: Statistics of the Catshill Small Holding Scheme†
Source: *Reference Table for Plan of Small Holdings (18/5/1896)*. Worcestershire County Council. W.R.O. 224.102 BA 650.

†No. of Holding refers to the numerical identification of each small holding plot. Acreage measured in acres, roods and perches. Purchase Money represents the total cost of the small holding. Cash Payment on Completion was the capital that the small holder had to pay, based upon the 1/5 initial downpayment. Residue was the money that the small holder had to eventually pay back to the county council. Repayment is the amount that has to be returned half-yearly.

demands for the extension of holdings. James Powell, already the owner of No. 4 and 5 holdings with a total of eight acres, had reaped sufficient profits to request further help from the County Small Holding Committee in 1906 to purchase another eight or nine acres of land from N.R. Nash of The Woodrow, an adjoining farm to his property, separate from his colony. Furthermore, he wished to erect a cottage on this land, despite having already obtaining an earlier building loan from the committee to assemble a home on No. 4 holding. As a model small holder, he received the necessary capital with no objections.¹²¹ The repeated construction of sanitary, substantially built rural dwellings was clearly a triumph for the Catshill experiment, particularly at a time when the issue of rural housing emerged as political dynamite. Realising from the outset that cottage accommodation near the small holdings was of 'very inferior character', the council put in place a procedure by which small holders could submit detailed plans, which if approved, would be funded initially by the Small Holdings Committee, on condition that 25% of the loan be repaid in instalments.¹²² Nine houses were eventually built at great cost to the council, with figures in the region of £250 to £350 the average. Hezekiah Norbury's cottage for Holding No. 7, one of the cheapest to construct, (Table 8) cost £236 inclusive of the outbuildings, a figure substantially higher than the £150 figure estimated by the Rural Labourers' League as an average cost for small holding housing. Local consensus rejected the apparent opulence of the red-brick cottages and Charles Masterman found their architectural form vulgar and unEnglish referring to them as 'substantial villas, with bow windows and porches', believing capital should have been directed towards stocking and diversifying holdings. Others proved rather more supportive. Rider Haggard when visiting Catshill was moved to write that the colony dwellings were 'excellent, commodious, and even ornamental.'¹²³

Partly in response to the damning evidence of the 1884 Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes and a reluctance by landowners to provide funds for cottage improvements, local authorities composed plans for modern, substantially built houses, suitable for the new yeoman farming class. Sir Edward Birkbeck repeatedly introduced a Labourer's Cottages Bill before Parliament in an attempt to secure sanitary accommodation in new cottages along with adequate provision of garden ground, only to be frustrated by the Irish Parnellite voting bloc. Anticipating a considerable demand for small holdings, the Rural Labourers' League sketched a more straitened and unadorned approach to farm house construction than the designs used at Catshill, situated closer to the myth of the ramshackled peasant existence than the stylish, purpose-built local authority conception. Placing emphasis upon cheap and quick assemblage with efficient utilisation of the limited space available, the small self-contained units could be 'erected by the ordinary village mason or

labourer', highlighting the emphasis placed upon stimulation of community action and re-animation of rural life. Building costs were to be contained, with conservative estimates ranging between £130-£180 as an average.¹²⁴ The illustration from the *Rural World* encapsulated this modest, unassuming method, its poorly defined perspectives suggestive of the rickety, 'lean-to' nature of construction, belying the notion of small holdings as the foundation for a more prosperous rural England. The judicious use of fencing in this artists impression to define the small holders space was perhaps a metaphor for the new individualism attendant with owner occupancy, ironically mimicking Parliamentary enclosure in its division of space. Comparisons based upon makeshift exteriors could be made with the later anarchistic and frequently temporary 'plotlands' built after World War I.¹²⁵ A more personalised holding (distinct from a local authority design) was invariably identifiable through an extravagant use of corrugated iron, even in the structure of the cottage: corrugated iron outside, match boarding inside, with approximately a four inch gap in-between to be filled with sawdust. Yet despite the semblance of instability, the new small holding cottage offered a more sanitary and restorative prospect for the labourer than the typical farm workers cottage, its modernising pretensions distant from the romance of ruination that had proved a saccharine fixation of popular idyllicism in the art of Helen Allingham and Myles Birkett Foster.¹²⁶

Eschewing the squalor of picturesque' country cottages, Catshill small holding accommodation was the most visible statement that the land reform movement could be thoroughly modern. This most tenacious of attempts to exercise the 1892 legislation had steered clear of the aesthetic communism of craft guild settlements as exemplified by the concurrent 'back to the land' scheme at Millthorpe. Certainly within the correspondences and reports of the small holders and Worcestershire County Council there is no sense that Catshill was a modern day evocation of the peasant tradition. Such romanticism was reserved for writers that cared to pass judgement on Catshill, particularly those who believed in the primacy of small holding legislation as a route to agricultural recovery. As a celebrated case of the 1892 Act actually working, the experiment became an easily manipulated and instantly recognisable icon for intensive production. Ruralist writers such as Charles Masterman, F.E. Green and Rider Haggard all praised the industry and prosperity of Catshill small holders. Reformers frequently requested further information on the setting up and financial running of the experiment, perhaps to implement their own schemes in locales where the councils had taken a less enlightened approach.¹²⁷ However, Thornley, the County Council Clerk did permit himself some whimsy in his important and widely-read account of Catshill for the *County Council Times* of 7 December 1904. He recounts a conversation held with one of the first small holders

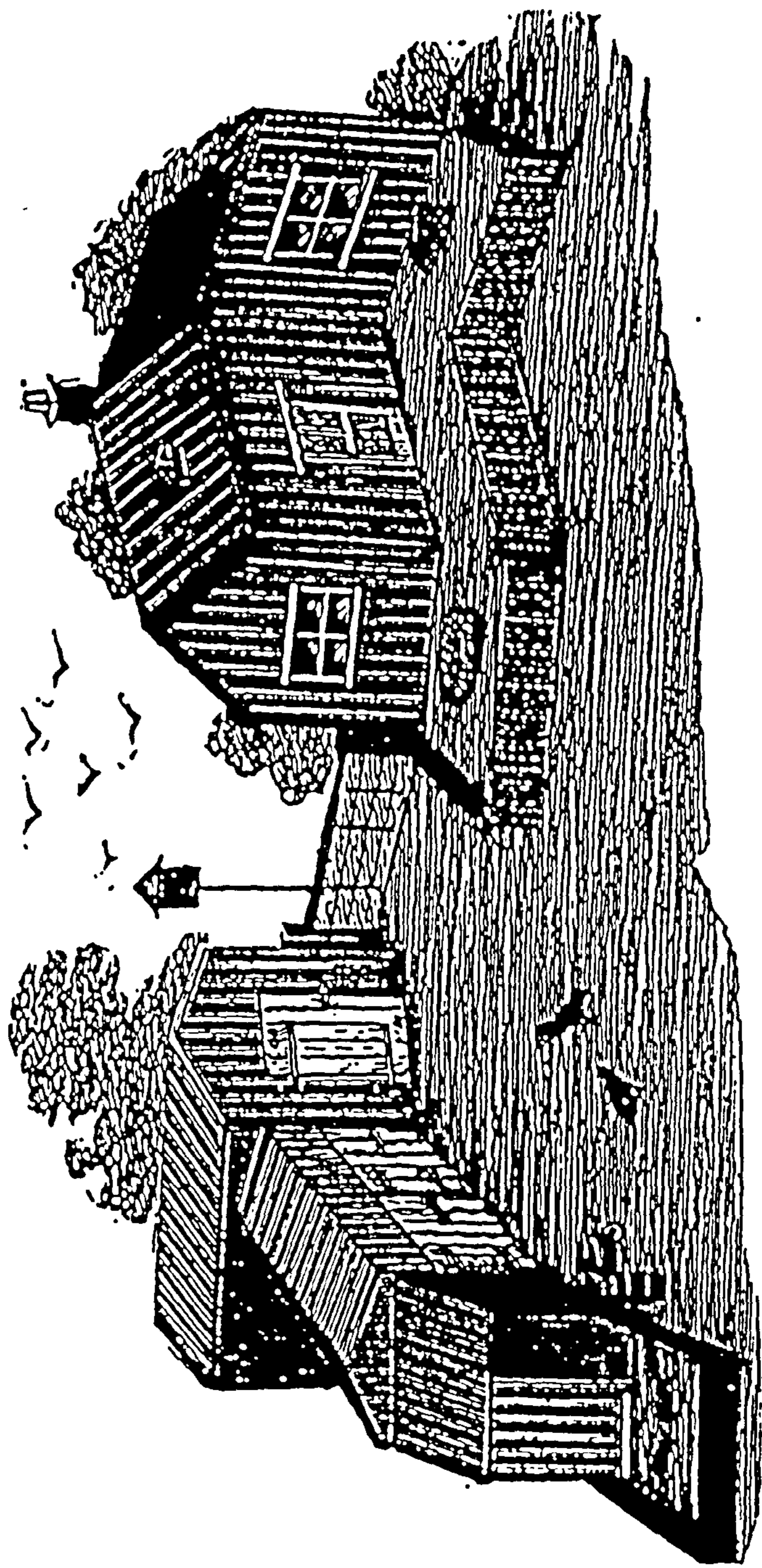


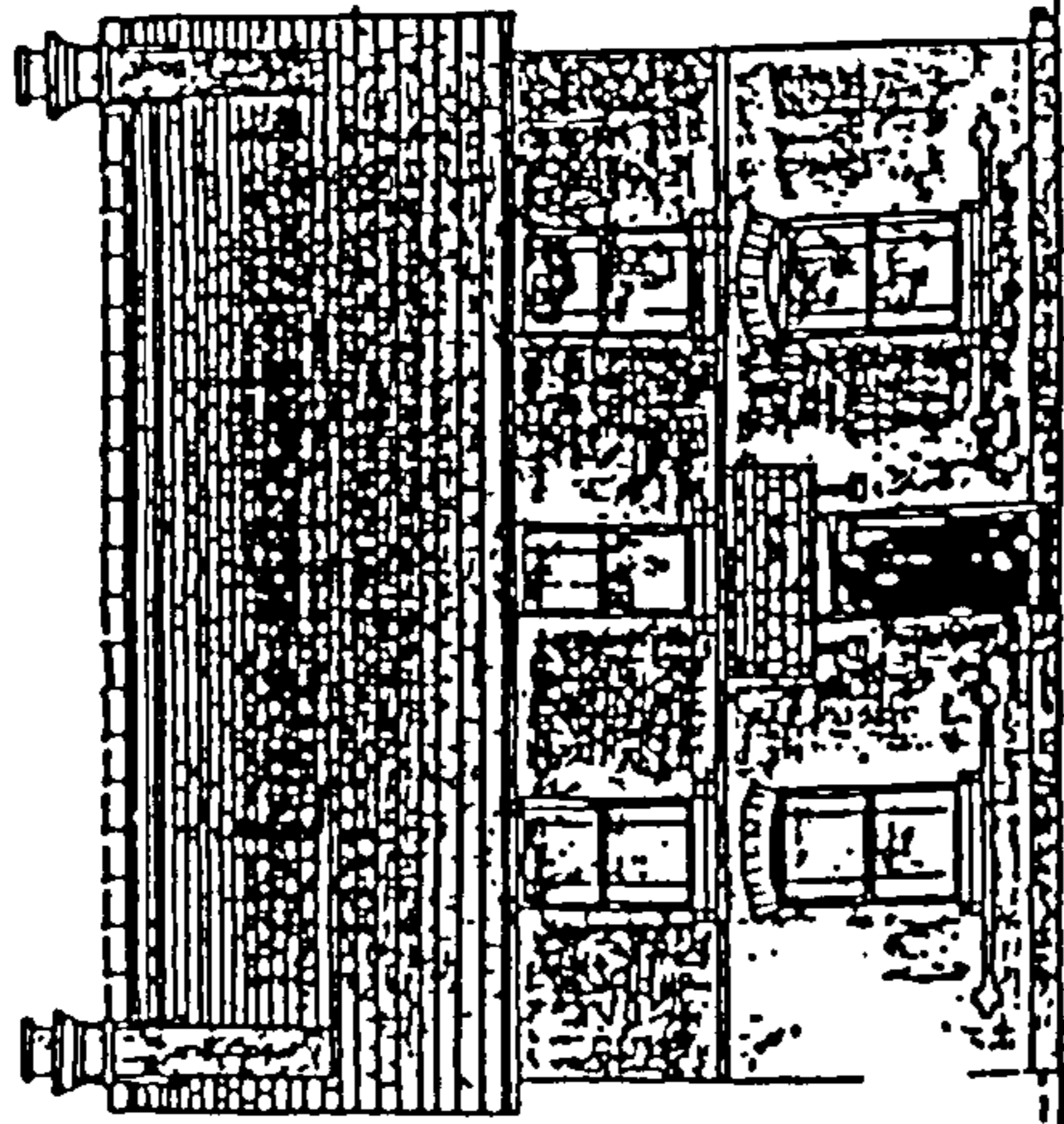
Figure 10: Artists Impression of Allotment and Small Holding Buildings

THE "WOODROW" SMALL-HOLDINGS ESTATE

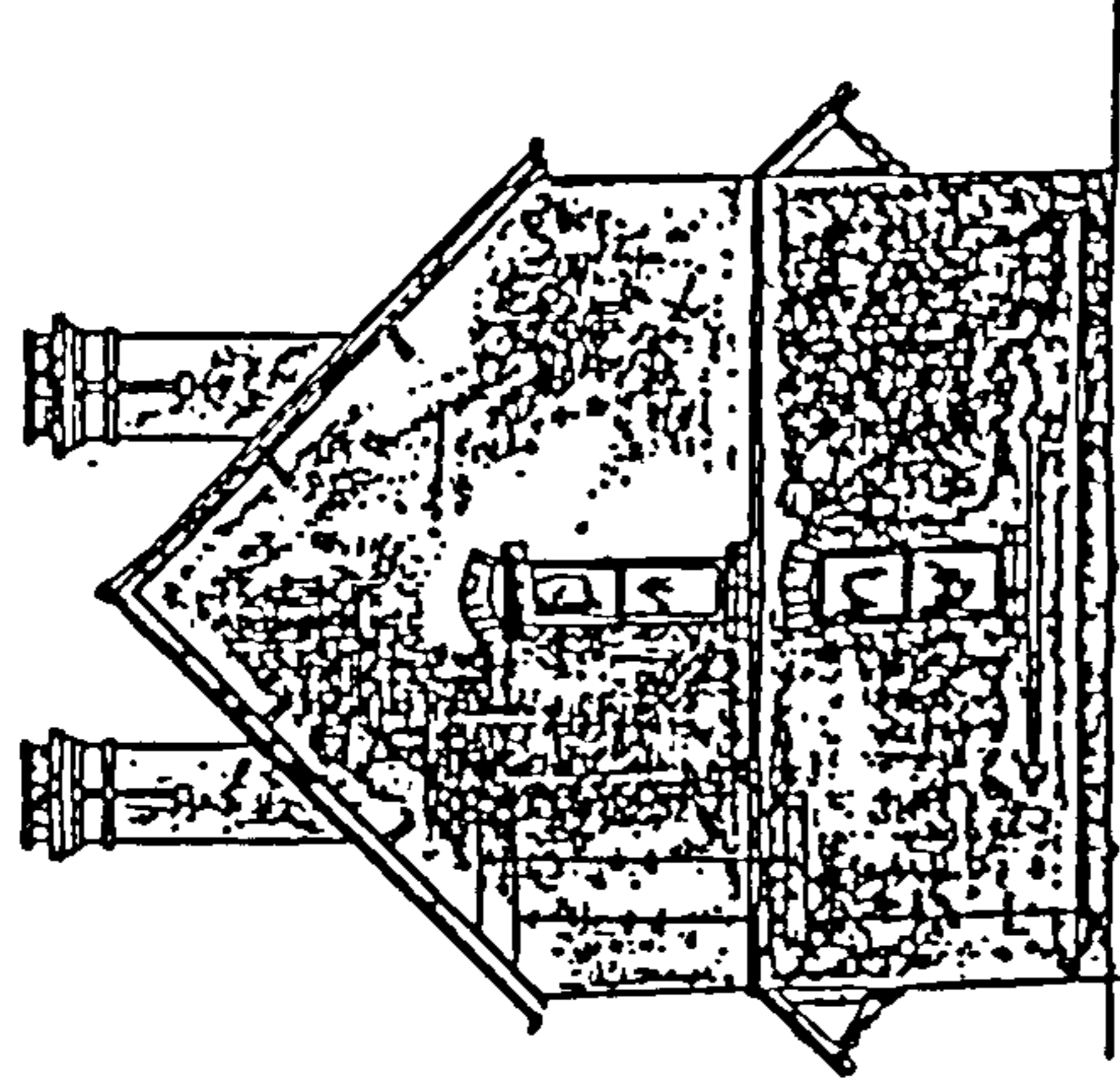
N^o. BROMSGROVE.

PROPOSED COTTAGE FOR M^r. H. NORBURY.

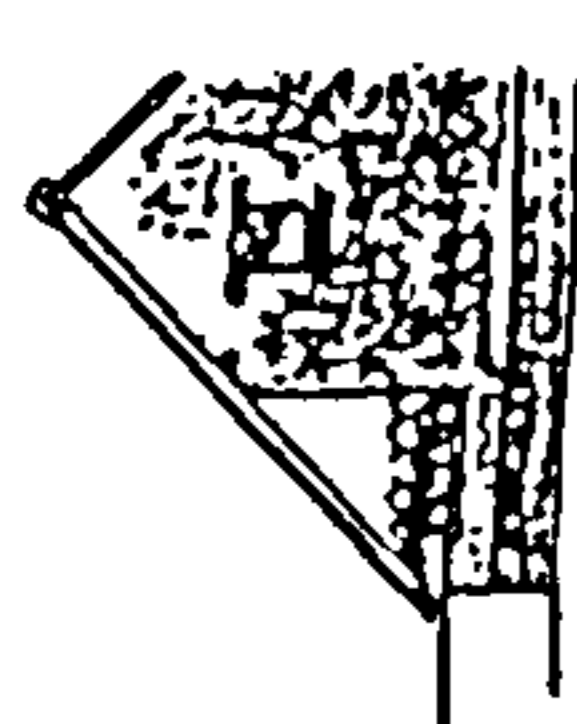
SCALE 1/8 INCH TO ONE FOOT.



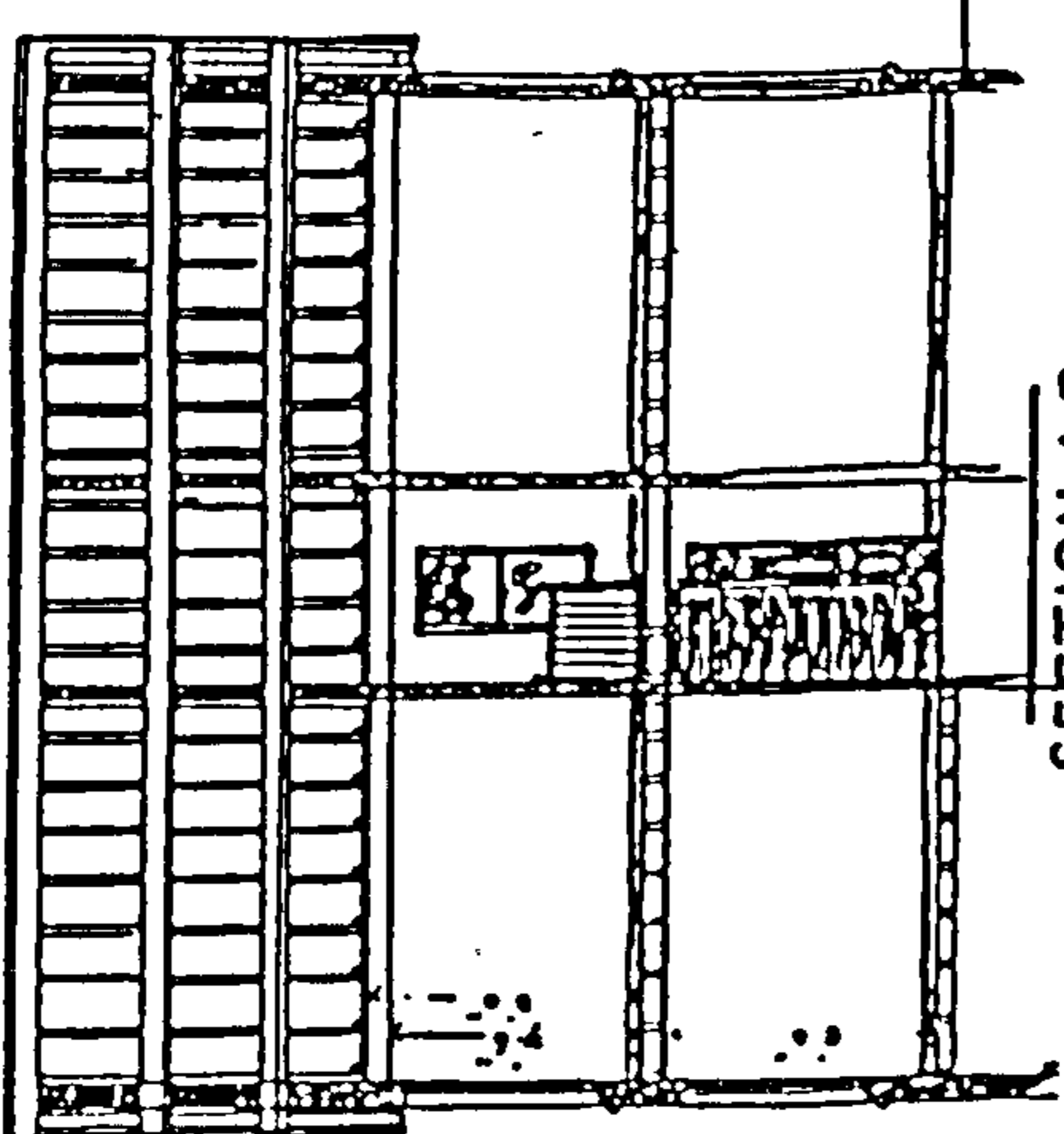
FRONT ELEVATION.



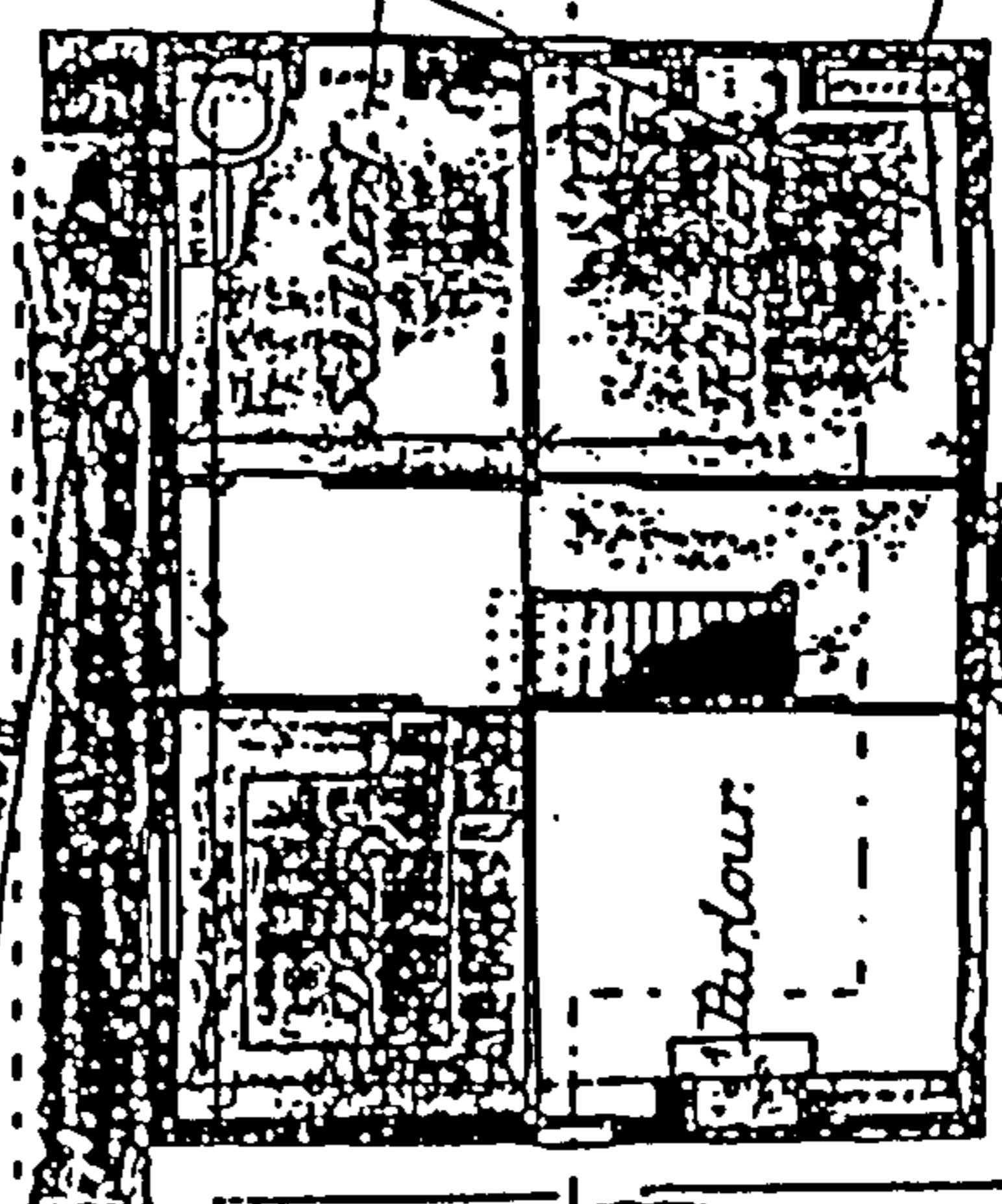
END ELEVATION.



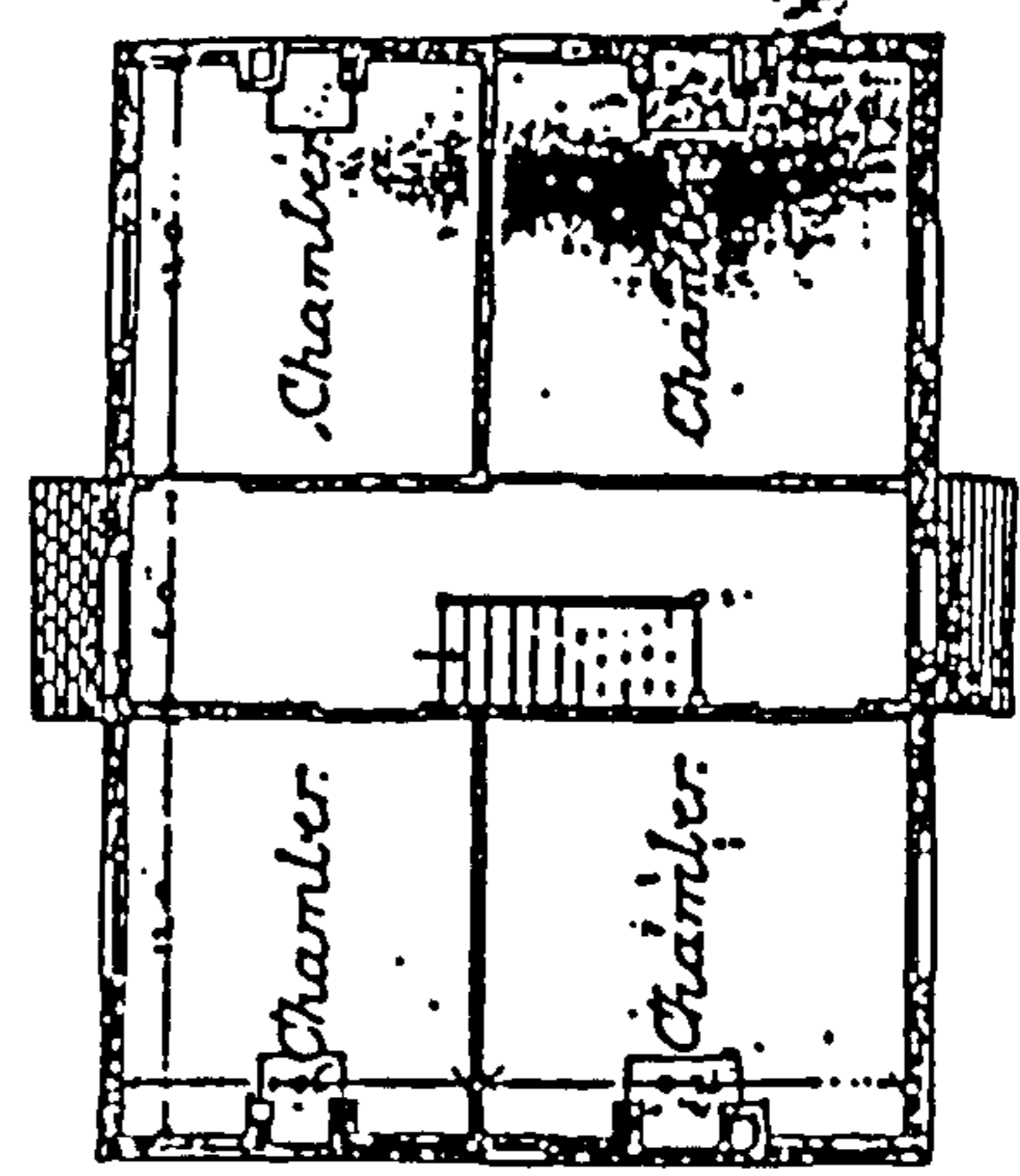
Lairn



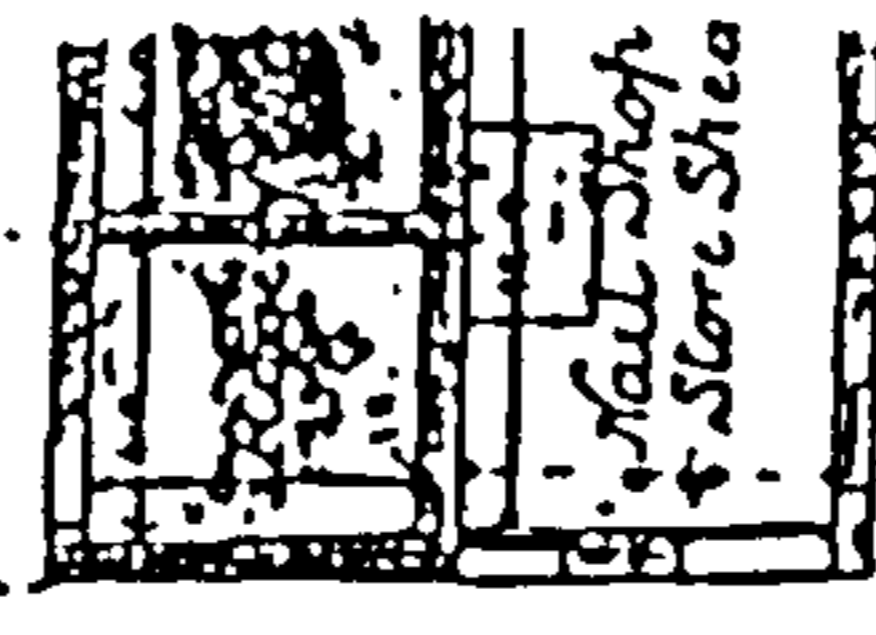
SECTION A.B.



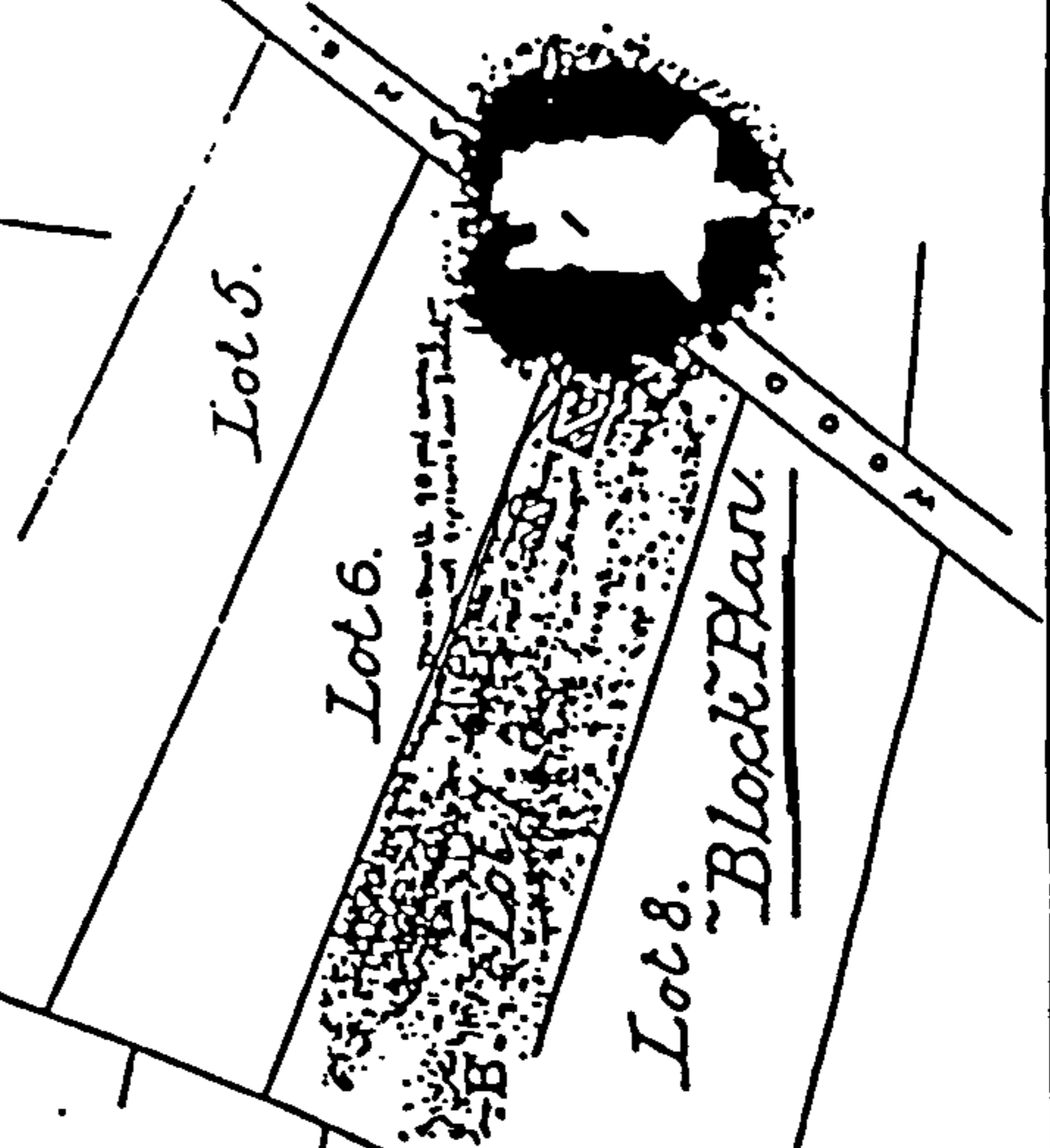
GROUND PLAN.



FIRST FLOOR PLAN.



Mail Shop & Store Shear



J. W. T

Figure 11: Building Plans For the Cottages at Catshill

who expressed that he had 'always longed to get back to the land on which he had lived as a boy' citing a spiritual return to lost pastoral roots. There is a clear sense in his opening paragraphs that programmes such as Catshill possessed the regenerative powers necessary to retard racial decay, displaying a keen awareness of the conclusions highlighted by the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration (1904), quoting from the findings that similar experiments should be carried out more frequently. One suspects that it is Catshill that F.E. Green refers to nearly two decades later when he states that 'some County Councils, I am glad to say, showed a patriotic interest even before the [Great] War in acquiring desirable sites for small holdings'.¹²⁸

Unfortunately, Catshill descended into a highly disputable symbol within wider Victorian cultural politics, appropriated as an exultation of voluntarism and compromise over nationalisation. It was an icon of individualism within co-operative systems over communism, though an alternative critique may have stressed that the experiment was merely the replacement of one benevolent yet spatially (and maybe emotionally) distant landlord with another, albeit a democratically elected body. Certainly Tom Bryan, an immigrant Worcestershire farmer, and former Mayor of Southwark, believed the County Council to be an inappropriate guardian simply because it was too cumbersome, both spatially and in terms of organisation to deal with numerous petitions for reform.¹²⁹ Parish councils offered a more viable route to establishing and maintaining a small holding plan, though, of course, old political biases and elites exercised more subtle and less readily detectable methods of social control through this level of organisation.¹³⁰ Certainly, evidence from the nearby parish of Belbroughton supports Bryan's claims. In this small parish, the council initially hired 18 acres at a rent of £49 10s in 1895. The thirty tenants paid £54 in return. By 1903 the council had accumulated enough money from the scheme to have hired over 200 acres at a total cost of £261 per year with 114 tenants, a number significantly higher than at Catshill paying £357 per annum in rent. By 1909 Frederick Impey stated that the council was letting over 300 acres to 140 tenants.¹³¹ Again, F.E. Green could offer a definitive conclusion on the experiment, propounding that the people of Belbroughton had 'lifted themselves from pauperism to comparative independence'.¹³²

Despite the fulfilment of the reformist objectives at Belbroughton, Catshill offered the blue-riband example of success and therefore the credit for its inception evolved into a prized political commodity. The experiment mediated the ideological rivalry between Gladstonian Liberals and Liberal Unionists. The two chief protagonists were Frederick Impey an active member of both the Small Holdings Committee of Worcestershire County Council and the pro-Gladstonian Allotments

and Small Holding Association (A.S.H.A.) based in Birmingham, and Jesse Collings and his Rural Labourers' League, also based in Birmingham. The conflict was primarily part of a wider political campaign to establish who really held the rural mandate, though no little personal vanity was involved in laying claim to Catshill. Collings and Impey had once been colleagues at the Allotments and Small Holdings Association (formerly the Allotments Extension Association), with Collings occupying the Presidency of the organisation and Impey the Honorary Secretary. It was in these formative days of the land reform movement that Impey claims to have provided the necessary ideological stimulation behind the English agrarian *petite culture* movement. Indeed, in a paper entitled 'Small Holdings in England' read to the British Association Meeting annual meeting of 1908 in Dublin, Impey stressed that he was the author and inspiration behind the pamphlet entitled 'Three Acres and a Cow', pre-empting Collings's use of the phrase in the House of Commons by a whole year.¹³³ In what was a clear Gladstonian-inspired contestation of established land reform history, Impey laid siege to Collings's other great ideological triumph: the employment of local authorities to construct small holding colonies. 'I urged' insisted Impey in his highly controvertible paper, 'and so far as I know, was the first to do so, that small holdings must be supplied by local authorities, with compulsory powers for procuring land to be re-let'. As documented earlier, Collings was eventually ousted from his own organisation by Home Rule supporters only to set up the Rural Labourers' League and here our adversaries paths diverge only to cross again at Catshill. Undoubtedly, Impey had a strong claim for instigating the experiment. He was from Worcestershire; he was at the heart of the County Council small holding mechanism and it was with a letter from A.S.H.A., of which Impey was now chairman, that the petition for land was found. However, one small but important piece of evidence partially undermines his case. J.M. Hodge, a solicitor and writer from Blairgowrie, engaged in a series of correspondences with Thornley around the time that the latter's article was published in the *County Council Times*. Hodge himself had been commissioned to write a series of reviews during 1904 for an unnamed journal on the land reform and small holding movements and so was interested in the fortunes of Catshill. However, after reading Thornley's paper Hodge wrote in surprise that 'I was under the impression that it was Mr Impey who was the pioneer in the small holding movement in the County Council of Worcester. You do not mention him at all. I suppose I must have been mis-informed'. Though grand conclusions are made from this one statement, it can be argued convincingly that Impey's role was obviously not seen as vital, particularly as Thornley would undoubtedly have known Impey quite closely. In fact Thornley's only comment on the augmentation of the Catshill programme was that the small holders and the

County Council both displayed a keen interest to get a colony under way which had led to land being bought and converted. Certainly the evidence for Jesse Collings's role in Catshill is more circumstantial, based instead upon his legislative campaign eventually leading to Worcestershire County Council's experimentation. The Birmingham Daily Mail offered a clear expression of how such thinking worked.

*...the operations of Mr Jesse Collings's Allotment Acts 1887 and 1890, had saved the people of the nail-making district of Catshill from starvation, and how, at the same time, the inhabitants of Birmingham had strawberries grown almost at their own doors, and sold to them at prices within the reach of all.*¹³⁴

It appears that if the Rural Labourers' League had played any role in Catshill, and the vast, unweeded collection of correspondences of the Small Holdings Committee revealed little evidence of contact, then this was in an entirely advisory capacity. However, the Eighth Annual Report of the League repeatedly emphasised a specific pedagogic undertaking at Catshill which embraced a wider aim of providing rural instruction on reformist legislative aims.¹³⁵ The League noted how it had sent a letter to each County Chairman and their respective small holdings committees promoting the activities at Catshill as an example of what could be achieved elsewhere. Undoubtedly by reducing this conflict down to personalities merely over-simplifies what was a highly complex economic and political debate. Specifically in the case of Collings, his own personal involvement in the Catshill experiment was probably very limited. This becomes an unequivocal claim when one considers the ignorance behind some of the questions he posed to the Clerk of the County Council such as the size and price of Woodrow Farm when purchased, the number of holdings and the number of cottages for compilation in his series of tracts on the subject published in the first decade of the twentieth century.¹³⁶

Catshill offered an unprecedented example of success under the unworkable Small Holdings Act of 1892, and therefore a degree of caution against exaggerated claims must be maintained in any appraisal. As a model for other potential schemes, Catshill proved unacceptable. Though there is some dispute over the quality of the soil, with both Masterman and Collings distancing themselves from claims that the soil-type was agreeable for intensive cultivation, there were other invaluable local conditions which mitigated in the small holder's favour.¹³⁷ Chief among these was the proximity to the Birmingham and Black Country markets which radically improved profitability potential for small foodstuff and cash crop production, most notably for strawberries in the Catshill experience, and significantly reduced the transport to market capital outlay. The Clerk of Worcestershire County Council noted that a significant, but unspecified, number of small holders possessed a horse and cart for

the specific purpose of sending goods to market, with the advantage that the cost of employing a stock distributor was negated.¹³⁸ Furthermore, the scheme was undoubtedly enhanced by the foresight and financial backing of the Worcestershire County Council Small Holdings Committee, undermining claims that land reform was based upon individualism, co-operation and self-help. Even Masterman, whose essay on Catshill could have proven very influential is disseminating the small holding ideal, is sensitive to the exasperation of the movement in the mythologising of Catshill. Paraphrasing one local, Masterman relates how '...he complained as others have complained, elsewhere of the effort of the imaginative journalist who drives furiously through the village and subsequently lets himself go upon it'. As each account of the new cultivators added an extra depth to the myth, the financial reality became more intangible. Serious questions about the viability of small holdings were masked. Only in 1914, nearly two decades after the initiation of Catshill did Jesse Collings suggest that most of the holdings were too small, averaging four and a half acres and that the period fixed for the repayment of loans made to the small holders had been too brief, rendering annual instalments inhibitive to further investment. As myriad letters between the Catshill land agent, A.W. Kemp and the Clerk of Worcestershire County Council confirm, the initial few years were typified by rental arrears and accumulated debt. Mr Thornley was moved to write to each small holder during September 1904 that the Small Holding Committee would no longer tolerate the growing practice of late re-payment on instalments, only mollifying the stern tone of the letters to state that '...the instalments in question payable by the small holders to the Council are not in the nature of rent, and they amount to much less than ordinary rent would be'.¹³⁹

The notional ability of individual small holders to cultivate their own property in an acceptable fashion was further undermined by a number of spectacular failures at Catshill. As the case of Edwin Rutter, the occupier of Small Holding No. 6 illustrates (and he was not the first example), when the farmer faced fiscal difficulty, the Council rescinded support. Evidence of Rutter's impending financial crisis emerged in a correspondence between Thornley and himself dated 13 October 1902. Receiving a double blow, Rutter is reminded that not only does he still owe the Council a half-yearly instalment for land and various building loan repayments, but also that concern has arisen over the quality of his cultivation techniques.¹⁴⁰ In the ensuing two months, Rutter is subject to a litany of complaints from Thornley, so vicious as to suggest that he was almost being hounded from Worcestershire's prized experiment. Stinging criticism accompanied another letter by Thornley from 14 November 1902. The Clerk had received evidence that Rutter was subletting the property, which was against the terms of contract and that further to this

misdemeanour he was given one month to resolve the apparently unacceptable difficulties he had experience. Rutter was also informed that his house was 'dirty', that his 'pig-sty was not occupied' and continued neglect of the arable portion of the small holding had led to the spread of weeds in No. 5, owned by James Powell, the model small holder.¹⁴¹ The old rural dictum of 'responsibility' was resurrected once more. Patronised to the point of being treated like a child, Edwin Rutter was accused of lacking the necessary responsible demeanour required to maintain a holding. His defence classically illustrates that the stated aims at Catshill had been too grandiose for all but the most exceptional of farmers. After agreeing to pay his debts he admits that discrepancies in cultivation was due primarily to a deficit in capital following the erection of a farm cottage on the holding.¹⁴² But the Small Holding Committee were not satisfied with Rutter's explanations or attempts to improve the land and following a suggestion by Kemp that the land was a burden, a decision was taken to relieve him of the holding with the Council repaying any money paid them in annual instalments, which in effect amounted to a fairer form of tenant eviction.¹⁴³ Other examples of small holders out of their depth were to follow quickly such as the committal of George Healey of Small Holding No. 29 to Worcester Gaol drawing heavy criticism of his unsatisfactory attempts to ensure continued cultivation and the removal of George Moore (of No. 10 holding) for neglecting his property on account of him being seventy-five years old. The rapid turnover in small holders reveals the precarious nature of independent small scale farming. If Catshill was to be the model programme of land reform and its principles a solution for agricultural depression, then the issue of farming insolvency had not been satisfactorily resolved.

In conclusion, Catshill provided additional questions and limited answers to wider issues of depression. Undoubtedly the scheme placed many on the land where once only one had farmed.¹⁴⁴ It had succeeded in demonstrating how farming could be profitable if imaginations were diversified away from traditional mixed or arable farming techniques through the provision of capital crops. It also illustrated that people with little experience of working the soil could eke out an existence upon the soil. Charles Masterman was convinced that Catshill offered potential for the English spiritual heartland. 'The possibilities in southern England were limitless' he exhorted, 'if prejudice could be overcome and the right stimulus applied'. Catshill provided a lesson in overcoming resistance to land reform and the need to nurture careful practice in those for whom the methods of the soil were alien or perhaps a distant childhood memory. That was Catshill: the model and myth. A harsher reality instead further enhanced criticism of the 1892 Act, revealing that capital and time far beyond the resources of most labourers was needed for the successful running of a holding constructed along the lines of the Catshill experiment. Small holdings built upon the

Catshill philosophy required full-scale commitment. Furthermore, as this specific case demonstrated, co-operative systems were not the natural tendency of untried small holders. Thornley recorded in his report for the *County Council Times* that Catshill presented little evidence of communal practices, especially in the retail of crops to Midlands markets. Perhaps the most overt criticism of the scheme was that it merely replaced one landlord-tenant relationship with another. This discussion on Catshill has attempted to impart the inherent need by some, even with the best intentions for the rural population, to practice social control. Despite the enlightened approach of the Worcestershire Small Holdings Committee, tension still persisted between farmers and labourers and a higher body, an historic tendency manifest most lucidly when financial difficulties arise. It appears as a common Victorian trait, and maybe one which has not gone away, as an inability to accept any degree of rural autonomy, in effect a belief that the farmer did not know best and was, in fact, in need of guidance. Acceptance that farmers could potentially possess the solutions for economic depression is absent. The real need for nurture lay in encouraging ideas indigenous to locales. If small holdings were to deliver the whole land reform ideal, then individual freedom to cultivate was essential. The provision of land was in reality, only half the remedy.

¹The popular debate for small holdings became increasingly vocal in response to agricultural depression. J. Thirsk, Introduction in A.H. Johnson, *The Disappearance of the Small Landowner* (orig. 1909) (1963) p.v.

²M.J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (Cambridge 1981); J. Marsh, *Back to the Land - the Pastoral Impulse in England, from 1880-1914* (London 1982). P.C. Gould, *Early Green Politics 1880-1900* (Brighton 1988).

³P.C. Gould, *Op Cit.*

⁴Archer suggests that 'allotments have largely escaped the historians archival spadework, receiving only occasional and sporadic examination'. J.E. Archer, *The Nineteenth-Century Allotment: half an acre and a row* *Economic History Review* 50 (1997) 26-57. There have been two recent theses which have explored both the Tory and Socialist land reform ideology and the reformulation of the rural as somehow representative of real England. M. Fforde, *The Conservative Party and Real Property in England, 1900-1914* (Unpubl. DPhil. Thesis. University of Oxford 1985). P.J. Ward, *Englishness, Patriotism and the British Left 1881-1924* (Unpubl. PhD. Thesis. University of London 1994).

⁵S.B. Ward, *Land Reform in England 1880-1914* (Unpubl. PhD. Thesis. University of Reading 1976).

⁶S.G. Sturney, *Owner-Farming in England and Wales 1900-1950* in W.E. Minchinton (Ed) *Essays in Agrarian History* Vol. II (Newton Abbott 1968) 281-306.

⁷P. Gruffudd, *Landscape and Nationhood: Tradition and Modernity in Rural Wales, 1900-1950* (Unpubl. PhD. Thesis. Loughborough University of Technology 1989). Danbom also provides a rare cultural critique of agrarianism in early twentieth century America, asserting the existence of rational and romantic readings of the relationship between agriculture and nationhood typified by Roosevelt's 'back to the land' ideas, an analogous patriotic subtext which also underpinned the late nineteenth-

century English small holding movement. D.B. Dandom, *Romantic Agrarianism in Twentieth Century America Agricultural History* 65.4 (1991) 1-15.

⁸J. Duncan and N. Duncan, (Re) reading the landscape *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 6 (1988) 117-126

⁹H. Evershed, State and Prospects of English Agriculture *Quarterly Review* 154 (1882) 175-210.

¹⁰Some schemes such as the Salvation Army Land Colonies promoted rural communes as a recourse from *urban* destitution, but placing the urban dweller back on the land was never the specified aim of ruralist land reform schemes.

¹¹F.J. Coverdale was particularly dismissive of small holdings, believing the issue was not worthy of consideration as a responsible route out of a cycle of depression. Letter by F.J. Coverdale to R.H. Pringle on the Depression Essex Record Office D/DPE121.

¹²*The Times* 5 October 1906, col. f, 7.

¹³From the evidence of Collings's later work to 'recolonise England', he evidently regarded the Empire as foreign and not an extension of Britain. His thinking may have been partly influenced by the fact that competition from Canada, Australia and New Zealand had significantly undermined British farming.

¹⁴Eder describes this psychological shift to the countryside as a bourgeois fugitive movement in response to the *fin de siècle* anxiety at the end of the nineteenth-century. Within the rural communes an escape through Romantic morality could be achieved. K. Eder, *The Rise of Counter-Culture Movements Against Modernity: Nature as a New Field of Class Struggle Theory, Culture and Society* 7 (1990) 21-47.

¹⁵J. Marsh, *Op Cit.*

¹⁶S. Rowbotham, 'Commanding the Heart', Edward Carpenter and Friends *History Today* Vol. 37.9 (1987) 41-46. Rowbotham explores how Carpenter developed a belief that sexual liberty, manual work and Socialism could flourish within the fresh air of a rural environment. Increasingly the countryside became symbolic of a removal from the increasing drudgery of late-nineteenth-century urban capitalist life.

¹⁷R. Lewis, 'News From Nowhere'; Utopia, Arcadia, or Elysium? *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 5.1 (1984) 55-67.

¹⁸The fondness for a rural heritage is encompassed in the need to authentically re-create the treasured myth in the material rural environment. However there is a danger of essentialising various representations of the rural idyll. There was no English rural cultural homogeneity. W.S. Keith, *The Rural Tradition* (Brighton 1975); S. Hunter, *Victorian idyllic fiction: Pastoral Strategies* (London 1984).

¹⁹W. Morris, *News from Nowhere* (London 1890). J. Redmond, Introduction to Routledge English texts version of Morris (1890); F. MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for our Time* (London 1994).

²⁰If this shift to ruralism was progressive in its manipulation of history, a more popular conception in art merely strove to depict the sentimentality of a sense of timelessness. F. Spalding, *Changing Nature: British Landscape Painting 1850-1950* in N. Bennett (Ed) *Landscape and Britain 1850-1950* (London 1983). Barrell suggests this is a critical transition in art from the 'artificial' imagery of classical Pastoral, through the 'jolly imagery of Merry England' to representations of the 'cheerful, sober, domestic peasantry'. The cottage lifestyle was an embodiment of contentment with its own poetic resonance. J. Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape - The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840* (Cambridge 1980). A.I. Shand's appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of the peasant for the *Cornhill Magazine* reveals the late-Victorian obsession of the spirituality, 'we own ourselves indebted to the English cottager for some of the sweetest poetry of the feelings and imagination'. A.I. Shand, *Cottagers and Cottages Cornhill Magazine* 41 (1880) 683-698.

²¹J. Collings, *Land Reform: Occupying Ownership, Peasant Proprietary and Rural Education* (London 1906) 70.

²²J.W. MacKail, Piers Ploughman and English Life in the Fourteenth Century *Cornhill Magazine* 3 (3rd series) (1897) 42-58.

²³Undoubtedly the urge to look to the pre-Enlightenment past ties in with *fin de siècle* crises over the direction of modern progressivism. Barry Smart claims '...it is apparent that ever since the onset of the modern era people have made attempts to uncover their roots in some version of the Middle Ages'. B. Smart, *Postmodernity* (London 1993) 29. U. Eco, *Travels in Hyper-reality* (London 1986).

²⁴J.E.T. Rogers, *Six Centuries of Work and Wages* (London 1887) 389.

²⁵The phrase is Carville Earle's. C. Earle, Historical geography in extremis? Splitting personalities and the postmodern turn *Journal of Historical Geography* 21 Review Article. 455-459.

²⁶The term 'radical theorists' was employed with gratuitously heavy irony by Baron Stanley of Alderley. In a scathing attack which appeared in *The Fortnightly Review*, Stanley accused C.A. Fyffe of playing dangerous politics while Liberal Unionists, Joseph Chamberlain and Jesse Collings were charged with theoretical ignorance. However, non-patriarchs argued such men should equally be seen as visionaries possessing greater practical sense than 'populist' figures such as Karl Marx and Henry George. H.E.J. Stanley, Radical Theorists on the Land *Fortnightly Review* 37 (new series) (1885) 297-308. C.A. Fyffe, The Coming Land Bill *Fortnightly Review* 37 (new series) (1885a) 285-296. P. Wright, *The Tyranny of the Picturesque* (London 1995).

²⁷M. Fordham, *Mother Earth* (London 1908).

²⁸Report from the Select Committee on Small Holdings with the Proceedings of the Committee (1890) c313, *iii/iv*.

²⁹Benedict Anderson contends many resurgent European nationalisms of the nineteenth-century (and the pastoral re-working of English patriotism is one) imagined themselves as 'awakening from sleep'. In a dialect with the past, the inferiority of the modern is contrasted with the glories of the past 'golden ages', periods in history which provided less diluted versions of the patriotic essence. Thus the peasant revival of the 'true' golden age of the Medieval period, represents a classic statement of reactionary nationalist assertion. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London 1983) 195.

³⁰The parallels Liberal Radicals sought with the Irish land question are evident in the phrase 'new departure' which had been employed to express a linkage between nationalist campaigns and agrarian discontent in an Irish context, particularly after the union of the Irish Land League and the Tenants League.

³¹J.L. Green, *Life of The Right Hon. Jesse Collings* (London 1920) 174. The exact words were Collings '...hoped that the day would come when every labourer who wanted them, might have his three acres and a cow'. J. Collings (1906), *Op Cit.* 179. However the phrase was employed to mock Collings and his campaign. Sir William Harcourt, a Gladstonian rival, taunted Collings as 'the member for three acres and a cow'.

³²The heritage of the allotment movement in particular has been studied in detail by David Crouch. His sentiments that allotments have an origin in the 'earlier patterns of domestic cultivation of open land' are especially appropriate for the study of the late-nineteenth-century agrarian small holding movement. D. Crouch, British Allotments - Landscapes of Ordinary People *Landscape* 31.3 (1992) 1-8.

³³J. Collings, (1889) Select Committee Report with Proceedings, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Index. 2.

³⁴If a nationwide system of small holdings was implemented, the vagaries of the agrarian economic system would be negated. This point is developed later in reference to co-operative systems.

³⁵The seasonality of arable cultivation forced farmers to lay off workers, temporarily leaving them without wages.

³⁶See the Fifth and Sixth Annual Reports of the Rural Labourers League (1894 and 1895).

³⁷M. Reed, The Peasantry of Nineteenth-century England: A Neglected Class? *History Workshop* 18 (Autumn) 53-76.

³⁸Lansdowne pursued this point. 'My idea of a small holding...is land of a size which will convert the labourer from a labourer into a small farmer'. Minutes of the Sixth Annual Meeting of the Rural Labourer's League. Annual Report (1895) 14.

³⁹Report from the Select Committee on Small Holdings with the Proceedings of the Committee. (1890). p.xvii.; M. Reed, Class and Conflict in Rural England: some reflections on a debate in M. Reed and R. Wells (Ed) *Class, Conflict and Protest in the English Countryside 1700-1880* (London 1990). As Reed suggests, 'peasantry' is a term that has defied categorization and a strong delineation. In a sense, defining the size of a peasant holding becomes a meaningless task, because it is dependent on a definitive meaning of 'peasantry'. However, W.G. Hoskins, F.M.L. Thompson and Christopher Hill have all subscribed to a variable figure less than one hundred acres. C. Hill, Review of V.M. Lavrovsky, Parliamentary Enclosure of the Common Fields in England at the End of the Eighteenth Century and Beginning of the Nineteenth-century *Economic History Review* 12 (1st series); W.G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant: The Economic and Social History of a Leicestershire Village* (London 1957); F.M.L. Thompson, A Terminological Confusion Confounded *Economic History Review* 24 (2nd series). Even the technical literature of the time tended to reinforce this figure. T. Stirton, Small Holdings *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 5 (3rd series) 84-94.

⁴⁰Small Holdings Act 1908, section 61; A.J. Spencer, *The Small Holdings and Allotments Acts, 1908-1926* (London 1927) 2. Spencer re-iterated size limitations in his detailed study of the minutiae of small holding law.

⁴¹J. Bidwell, Minutes of Evidence from the Select Committee on Small Holdings (1889) c313 q5,161-5,168, 277/8.

⁴²J. Standring, Minutes of Evidence from the Select Committee on Small Holdings (1889) c313 q3205, 181. S.R. Haresign demonstrates in Lincolnshire, that though some small farmers made profits, this was usually with the help of benevolent landlords who had set the schemes up initially such as Richard Winfrey M.P. in the Holland area of the county. S.R. Haresign, Small Farms and Allotments as a Cure for Rural Depopulation on the Lincolnshire Fenland 1870-1914 *Lincolnshire History and Archaeology* 18 (1983) 25-36. Druce's Assistant Commissioners Report on the Isle of Axholme for the Richmond Commission was highly critical of the levels of poverty induced through high land costs. If possible, the financial situation in Lincolnshire was even more desperate by the mid-1890s. Walter Bear reported in 90% of property which was mortgaged fifteen to twenty years prior, the borrowers are either ruined, in the process, or have, sold up, or are 'at the mercy of the mortgagors'. W.E. Bear, Perish Agriculture! *Quarterly Review* 180 (1895) 406-430.

⁴³Stirton envisaged a time, when agriculture had largely switched to small holding methods, but until then the evidence he had before him suggested the financial limitations of the labourer would hinder the proper, and therefore successful, stocking and cultivation of a holding. '...while a man remains a labourer, it is impossible that he will be able to stock or cultivate more than three acres of pasture, or half an acre of arable land, at the most'. T. Stirton, *Op Cit.*

⁴⁴For a wider discussion on the motivations behind this economic grievance see H.J. Perkin, Land Reform and Class Conflict in Victorian Britain in J. Butt and I.F. Clarke (Ed) *Victorians and Social Protest* (Newton Abbot 1973) 187.

⁴⁵P. Kropotkin, *Agriculture* (London 1896) Personal Publication.

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- ⁴⁶T. Williamson and E. Bellamy, *Property and Landscape - A Social History of Land Ownership and the English Countryside* (London 1987).
- ⁴⁷J.B. Kinnear, The Coming Land Question *Fortnightly Review* 26 (new series) (1879) 305-317.
- ⁴⁸Ibid.
- ⁴⁹R. Douglas, *Land, People and Politics: A History of the Land Question in the United Kingdom 1878-1952* (London 1976).
- ⁵⁰T.M. Watt, *The Squire and the Doctor or Landlord and Tenant: the Story of an English Eviction* (Personal Publication 1896).
- ⁵¹A.R. Wallace, *The 'Why' and 'How' of Land Nationalisation* (London 1883).
- ⁵²W. Morris, A Dream of John Ball in W. Morris *The Collected Works of William Morris* (London 1912).
- ⁵³J. Collings (1906), *Op Cit.* 314.
- ⁵⁴K. Marx, *Capital* Vol. 1 Part VIII, 800. 'In the nineteenth-century, the very memory of the connection between agricultural labourers and the communal property had, of course long vanished.'
- ⁵⁵J. Ruskin, *Munera Pulveris* (Orpington 1886).
- ⁵⁶Report from the Select Committee on Small Holdings (1890), vi.
- ⁵⁷John Ferguson wrote critically of the landowning aristocracy's role in the erosion of the peasant. 'It [pauperism] is a festering sore which cannot be healed so long as the Upas tree of feudalism casts its poisonous influence around'. J. Ferguson, *The Land for the People - An appeal to all who work by brain or hand* Scottish Committee for the Taxation of Land Values (n.d.).
- ⁵⁸United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values, *Rural Land Reform - Better Days are Coming* (London 1911). A similar quote adding that land for leisure remained labour starved also appeared in the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values, *A further plea of urgency addressed to the government* (London 1910).
- ⁵⁹R.L. Outhwaite, *Labour Unrest - The Young Liberal Policy* (London 1911).
- ⁶⁰F. Channing, *The Truth About Agricultural Depression: An economic study of the evidence of the Royal Commission* (London 1897) xiv.
- ⁶¹Richards concluded that 'It is impossible to study the law with regard to rent without coming to the conclusion that there has been a constant intention to strengthen and safeguard the position of the landlord'. R.C. Richards, The Landlords Preferential Position *Fortnightly Review* 47 (new series) (1890) 881-895.
- ⁶²'...the burden of encumbrances on the land prevents a very large number of landlords from developing its capabilities'. J.B. Kinnear, *Op Cit.*
- ⁶³One of F.A. Channing's primary motivations for dissenting from the majority report of the second Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression was despair at the continued deference to the landowning position. 'It is evident throughout the report of the majority that the situation has been considered almost exclusively from the standpoint of the landlord, and has not been thrashed out solely from the economic point of view'. F.A. Channing, *The Truth About Agricultural Depression* (London 1897).
- ⁶⁴F.B. Zincke, Mr Caird and Land Owning Cultivators *Fortnightly Review* 31 (new series) (1882) 1-12.

⁶⁵W.E. Bear, An English Land Bill *Fortnightly Review* 32 (1882) 496-510.

⁶⁶H.E.J. Stanley, Radical Theorists on the Land *Fortnightly Review* 37 (new series) 279-308. The italics are mine.

⁶⁷In a review of *Land Reform* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Collings' fight against governmental apathy was highlighted. Collings had attempted '...to bring home... to the public and to politicians, who seem little willing to listen to their [Rural Labourers' League, the land reform organisation of which Collings was the life-President] arguments, some sense of the manifold dangers which threaten a country that is content to allow the progressive decline of its agriculture and rural population'. *The Times Literary Supplement* 3 August 1906, 270.

⁶⁸Clearly, Collings endorsed the 'landlord blame' thesis. He was particularly critical of the way the landed establishment had manipulated Parliament to secure their own rural agenda. The table, extracted from *Land Reform* demonstrates that in a number of rural counties population decline was a real problem. What is interesting, however, is that the period surveyed was ten years after the 1892 Small Holdings Act, illustrating the real failure of the cultivating ownership campaign.

⁶⁹S. MacCoby, *English Radicalism 1886-1914* (London 1953).

⁷⁰For a short period, Radical politicians had seen the Alliance as a useful contrivance for rural success, but internal divisions forced the Radicals to shift attention to the enfranchisement of the agricultural labourers. J.P.D. Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London 1974).

⁷¹A Gladstonian rival conceded that Collings may 'justly be regarded as the pioneer of the agrarian movement in English Liberalism'. Anon. London Letter *Rural World* Vol. IV no. 162 (1892) 63. This chapter seeks to rescue Collings from the periphery of late nineteenth-century history, revising his unworthy reputation for being Chamberlain's loyal henchman. Alternatively he has been described as March Hare to Chamberlain's Mad Hatter and 'Chamberlain's Sancho Panza'. R. Douglas, Entry on Jesse Collings in J.O. Baylon and N.J. Gossman (Ed) *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals* Vol. III (London 1988) 207-209. D.A. Hamer (Ed) *The Radical Programme by Joseph Chamberlain and Others* (Brighton 1971). D. Judd, *Radical Joe: A Life of Joseph Chamberlain* (London 1977) 65.

⁷²There is a danger here that Collings could be elevated to heroic status in the same way that the eighteenth-century agricultural improvers were exaggerated for the 'big picture' history. As was made clear in the introduction to this chapter, there were a number of different reform schemes reflecting all of the political parties, ideologies and agendas. *The Times* 6 August 1907, col. a, 8; *The Times* 26 March 1908, col. a, 10.

⁷³Report from the Select Committee on Small Holdings (1889) c313, 1 and 13. *The Rural World*, the journal of the Rural Labourers' League promoted itself as 'advocating the interests of rural labourers, artisans, cottagers, farmers and the country population generally'.

⁷⁴H.H. Smith, Agricultural Depression and its Remedies *Quarterly Review* 176 (1893) 521-548. Smith suggested to the landowning readership of the *Quarterly Review* they faced two inevitable choices. Firstly, that unjust state legislation was a real possibility if the depression persisted and secondly some steps to increasing the ownership of land should be taken to avoid a rural revolution. It is interesting to note in Smith's article that at no point is the hardship of the labourer referred to. Instead the prospects of small holdings eroding the landlordist power base become the primary issue. As Rowland Blennerhassett informed the readers of the *Fortnightly Review*, the land question and the denial of rights by an out-moded feudal system was critical in the commencement of the French Revolution. Blennerhassett saw the Revolution as the dawn of 'a new era in the history of landed property in Europe'. R. Blennerhassett, The Land Question in Europe *Fortnightly Review* 30 (new series) 238-252. Collings's vision was founded upon compromise. Alternative, egalitarian philosophies of reform favoured more confrontational attacks upon an entrenched and anachronistic property law, particularly those propounded by socialists and anarchists such as Prince Pyotr Kropotkin and Alfred Russel Wallace's Land Nationalisation Society. The 'Single Tax' campaigns of the English Land Restoration League also invoked a growing resistance towards oligarchic land control through their Red Van platform and provided a route into socialism for rural dwellers. A. Howkins, Book Review of P.C. Gould's 'Early Green Politics 1880-1900' *Journal of Historical Geography* 16 (1990) 351-352.

However, a substantial proportion of allotment and small holding construction was initiated by sympathetic landowners. There is also a need, therefore, to understand the relationship between patriarchal motivation and a culture of depression.

⁷⁵Again, a parallel can be drawn with the southern spatial bias to the Condition of Rural England literature, particularly in symbolic representation of the rural England held in the imaginary realm.

⁷⁶*The Times* 1 May 1907, col. d, 7.

⁷⁷Though offering an agrarian solution, the intentions of Collings's 'back to the land' schemes are social in outlook rather than offering technical initiatives. This social consciousness reflects the nature of debate engaged in by the rural realist writers of the Condition of Rural England debate.

⁷⁸*The Times* 22 November 1920, col. b, 7. Obituary. The Dictionary of National Biography states that in later life, Jesse Collings was particularly '...fond of tracing his descent from the Palmers [his mother's family] because they had, he believed, been yeoman farmers'.

⁷⁹E.P. Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons: Ideal and Reality in Nineteenth-century Urban Government* (London 1973) 83.

⁸⁰In 1868 Jesse Collings published a pamphlet on the American School system. He argued a national, secular and compulsory education system should be set up with state aid, but with local management.

⁸¹J. Collings, *Address on the Land Question* (Birmingham 1882).

⁸²A.C. Osler, Chairman of the St. Thomas's Ward Liberal Association and a supporter of Jesse Collings described the plight of labourer representation as thus. 'They have no vote, they have no champions; the landlord cares, not for them and now they appeal to the workmen of the towns, and above all to Birmingham, and they cry, will you help us?' Here Osler illustrates how the rural labourer possessed even less status than his urban counterpart. This undoubtedly fermented rural resentment as well as conflicting with the later eugenic argument of the inherent superiority of the rural labourer. J. Collings (1882), *Op Cit.*

⁸³J. Collings, *The Agricultural Labourer* in J. Chamberlain (Ed) *The Radical Programme* (London 1885).

⁸⁴*Rural World* Vol. 2. No. 101, 21 November 1890, 1304.

⁸⁵The *Rural World* of October 1893 unveiled Collings's ill-concealed consternation by branding Arch a betrayer or his own farming interest by failing to move any legislation through Parliament. *Rural World* Vol. 5. No. 253, 30 October 1893, 729. J. Collings (1906), 165.

⁸⁶The 'inevitability' of Collings pursuing a Parliamentary career is suggested by his following in the shadow of Chamberlain on the Birmingham City Council. The other prominent figure of the Birmingham Radical cell was George Dixon, the famous Victorian educational reformer and ideological counterpart to Collings on the issue of elementary education.

⁸⁷Joseph Chamberlain immediately suspected a Conservative conspiracy to oust Collings from his Parliamentary seat in retaliation for bringing down the previous Tory government. In a letter to Stuart Rendel M.P., Chamberlain openly states his suspicion. 'The most serious act of hostility has been the presentation of a petition against his own return which has been supported by funds largely contributed from the Carlton Club'. One assumption that can be made is that Collings increasingly became an isolated figure in the House of Commons by being an uneasy (and evidently unwanted) bedfellow of the Conservative Party and pariah in Gladstonian Liberal circles. J. Chamberlain, Letter to Stuart Rendel M.P. 13 April 1886. Birmingham University Library Special Collection L. Adds 5874.

⁸⁸J. Collings (1906) 176. Walter Bear described the Agricultural Holdings Act of 1875 as a 'homily to landlords', clearly illustrating Collings's assertion. Shaw-Lefevre reported the revisions in the Agricultural Holdings Act of 1883 had been met with stern resentment by the landowners in Parliament. W.E. Bear, *Ideal Land Tenure and the Best Makeshift* *Fortnightly Review* 63 (new series) (1898) 68-80; G. Shaw-Lefevre, *The Agricultural Holdings Act (1883)* *Nineteenth-century* 14 (1883) 674-694.

⁸⁹J. Collings (1906), 179.

⁹⁰Collings tenure at the Allotments Extension Association was to prove fairly unsuccessful. Not only was he frustrated by the failure of the Allotments Extension Act (1882) to deliver any material benefit for the labourer, but the tensions that developed following the Liberal party split saw him ousted from the presidency by the Gladstonian element of the organisation.

⁹¹Disenchanted by the shift to Home Rule politics following his removal, Collings pleaded that the organisation be returned to its small holding objectives. The unwillingness of the Gladstonians to support Collings forced him to form a breakaway group that became the Rural Labourers' League.

⁹²The actual division recorded 329 votes in support of the Collings, with a significant number of votes secured through support from the Parnellite bloc. *Hansard* 26 January 1886.

⁹³The Irish Home Rule question was to eventually, and this was not foreseen at the time, derail the Radical land reform agitation. H.J. Perkin neatly summarizes the issue when stating '...the importunate irrelevance of the Home Rule dragged the Radicals and Land Reformers from the high road just as their Canaan came in sight, to pass another generation in the wilderness'. H.J. Perkin, *Op Cit.* 174. Roy Jenkins suggests in his recent biography of Gladstone that agricultural welfare was not a primary motivating issue for the amendment stating that 'no one saw the issue as primarily bucolic' which foreshadowed the schisms and eventual electoral failure of the Liberal Party. R. Jenkins, *Gladstone* (London 1995) 541.

⁹⁴The Gladstonians refused to accept the charge that they had failed to redeem their pledge of support to Collings's campaign. Sir William Harcourt, twice Gladstone's Chancellor of the Exchequer and the nemesis of Collings, claimed the pre-eminence of Home Rule legislation over land reform had been made clear following the election. *The Times* 26 April 1890, 10 - 'Sir William Harcourt and the Agricultural Labourers' Letter to the Editor; Rural Labourers' League (1889) First Annual Report 5. Harcourt retorted to claims of betrayal by suggesting it was Collings in particular who had been disloyal to the Liberal cause. *The Times* 23 October 1889, col. d, 6 - 'Collings on the Allotment Act'.

⁹⁵The shift in the rural vote is a pretty reliable indicator of the popularity that Collings and Joseph Chamberlain enjoyed amongst the rural labouring classes.

⁹⁶It is highly likely Collings anticipated an impending election or at least the removal of Gladstone, which would facilitate the passing of his legislation.

⁹⁷*Rural World* Vol. I No. 49, 23 November 1889, 577. The *Times Literary Supplement* review of his biography attempted to rationalise Collings's motivations by suggesting that he 'had always the essential conservatism of the men of the soil'. Further to this, the review asserted that Collings's Radicalism was 'an accident of his business career', that was not evident in his later ruralist campaigns. *Times Literary Supplement* 20 May 1920, col. c, 313 - Book Review of *Life of the Right Hon. Jesse Collings*.

⁹⁸*Times Literary Review* 3 August 1906, col. b, 270. Book Review of *Land Reform*. The article implies, quite correctly, that Collings had failed to grasp the Irish situation fully, by disregarding notions of national emancipation and self-determination in making a direct comparison with the English situation. Though Collings drew inspiration from the Irish drive to reform, the two land questions were essentially different. Collings sought justification for his method of maintaining the labourer on the soil from the absence of an appreciable financial loss to the government for investment in a scheme of small holdings. However, the review supported Collings's conclusion for the 'abstract justice that few will be inclined to quarrel'. His later ideas were influenced by the Irish Land Purchase

Act of 1903 which had enabled tenants to become owners and had lowered emigration levels from 8.9 per 1,000 in 1901 to 7 per 1,000 in 1911.

⁹⁹*Rural World* Vol. VI No 291, 13 July 1894, 495. Unfortunately, this leader article was illustrative of Collings's ill-concealed national chauvinism, though he did not personally write the text.

¹⁰⁰J. Collings, *Speech on the Irish Land Question* (Birmingham 1881).

¹⁰¹F.L. Soper confused the origins of the Act by claiming it to be the work of Joseph Chamberlain, which possibly offers a useful insight into an outside view of the relationship between Collings and Chamberlain. F.L. Soper, *Landlordism: What it is; What it does; and What should be done about it*. (n.d. Privately Published) 7.

¹⁰²It was probably more than coincidence that the 1892 Small Holdings Bill was passed into law before the election in 1892. Though the Bill was introduced by Chaplin on behalf of the Government, the outline of the law had been shaped by Collings's thinking.

¹⁰³J. Long, The Agricultural Programme *Fortnightly Review* 59 (new series) (1896) 635-650.

¹⁰⁴A second example is the 1887 Allotments Act which was only passed after a severe re-working of the initial Bill which jettisoned all of the provisions for small owner occupied farms.

¹⁰⁵What must be borne in mind is that the Conservative Unionists had just lost the general election and with it any chance of the successful implementation of legislation, particularly as Gladstone was now defying political odds to still lead the Liberal Party.

¹⁰⁶*Times Literary Supplement* 3 August 1906, col. b, 270. The review acknowledges that should an agrarian party gain a strong enough power base, Collings's measures could easily have become the law of the land. Fforde also draws attention to the National Farmers Union (formed in 1904 as the Lincolnshire Farmers Union) and its desire for separate agricultural Members of Parliament. M. Fforde, *Op Cit*.

¹⁰⁷However, later replacement tenants did originate from more diverse occupations such as school-master in the case of Herbert Watts or Market Gardener and Shopkeeper as typified by William King.

¹⁰⁸The *Bromsgrove Weekly Messenger* 21 July 1894 reported that altogether, sixty-eight applicants for land signed a petition. The petition was initially sent in a correspondence from C.D. Sturge, the Secretary of the Birmingham based Allotments and Small Holdings Association with the claim that 'much in want of land'. Letter from C.D Sturge to Clerk of Worcestershire County Council. Worcester Record Office (W.R.O.) 224.102 BA 1422, 5 December 1893.

¹⁰⁹F.E. Green, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer 1870-1920* (London 1920) 137.

¹¹⁰William King, who took over Holding No. 22 died in 1905. When the holding was eventually re-let, the council gave preference to applications from people not already small holders on the colony. Worcester County Council Small Holding Committee Minutes for 29 January 1898 and 21 October 1905. W.R.O. 224.101 BA 611.

¹¹¹The Board enacted subsection four of section nineteen of the 1892 Small Holdings Act.

¹¹²County of Worcester. Land purchase from Matthias Rollason (8 February 1894), W.R.O. 224.102 BA 650. Worcestershire County Council Small Holding Committee Minutes (28 July 1894), W.R.O. 224.101 BA 611

¹¹³Worcestershire County Council Small Holding Committee Minutes (8 February 1896), W.R.O. 224.101 BA 611. C.F.G. Masterman, Nail makers and farmers, in C.F.G. Masterman *et al*, *To Colonise England: A Plea for Policy* (London 1907) 84

¹¹⁴There were twenty-six holders by mid-1896.

115 Agreement between A.W. Kemp, Auctioneer and Valuer for and on behalf of Worcestershire County Council and Simeon Price of Little Moor Farm. W.R.O. 224.102 BA 650.

116 The map was drawn for the Land Registry and originally showed the owner, acreage, tithe and purchase money cost of each holding. W.R.O. 224.102 BA 580. Indeed, by 1902 Simeon Price had abandoned the colony altogether transferring his property interests to George Banner, owner of No. 13 Holding, giving Banner a holding of over ten acres. Letter to Mr Simeon Price from the Clerk of Worcestershire County Council (6 January 1902). W.R.O. 224.102 BA 1422. By 1907 Masterman could report that there were twenty-five tenants, with five possessing more than one holding. C.F.G. Masterman (1907), *Op Cit.* 84.

117 Quote extracted from Report by the Catshill Small Holding Association. 2 January 1902. W.R.O. 224.102 BA 1422.

118 In fact the only holding not owned outright in the south-eastern fields was Small Holding No. 5 which was in any case actually allotted to the owner of No. 4 Holding, James Powell. See County of Worcester - Report of the Small Holding Committee to the County Council. W.R.O. 224.102 BA 650.

119 Hansard Vol. CLXXX (1907) 16 August 1829-33.

120 'The men who look after the [allotments] are mostly nail makers, but this is a declining trade, and without the allotments and small holdings, the men would have considerable difficulty in earning a living'. Letter from S. Thornley, Clerk to Worcestershire County Council to the Agricultural Organisation Society. 25 October 1904. W.R.O. 224.102 BA 1422.

121 Worcestershire County Council Small Holding Committee Minutes. 10 December 1906. W.R.O. 224.101 BA 611.

122 Report of the Small Holdings Committee to Worcestershire County Council. 13 March 1899. W.R.O. 224.102 BA 1422.

123 C.F.G. Masterman (1907), *Op Cit.* 84. H.R. Haggard, Rural England Vol. I. (London 1902) 343. Sir William Wedderburn similarly referred to the cottages as possessing a 'superior character'. *The Gloucester Journal* 30 September 1905 - Wedderburn, Sir W. Small Holdings in Worcestershire A Letter to the Editor.

124 Collings suggested the total cost for construction of a house and farm buildings, the provision of fences and other facilities would cost around one hundred and fifty pounds. However, Collings vigorously stressed that a much lower figure could be obtained if the prospective small holder remained housed within the village, nullifying the need to build a new farm house. J. Collings, Minutes of Evidence from the Select Committee on Small Holdings (1889) c313, 76. William Holman, a bricklayer submitted a similar figure in evidence to the Select Committee on Small Holdings. W. Holman, Minutes of Evidence from the Select Committee on Small Holdings (1889) c313, q2,984, 171.

125 D. Hardy and C. Ward, *Arcadia For All - the legacy of a makeshift landscape* (London 1984).

126 C. Wood, *Paradise Lost: Paintings of English Country Life and Landscape* (London 1988).

127 J.H. Diggle, steward and surveyor of the Norfolk Small Holding Association was keen to receive a copy of the plans with the intention of developing an experiment in East Anglia. J.H. Diggle to S. Thornley, Clerk of Worcestershire County Council. W.R.O. 224.102 BA 1422. Jesse Collings prior to the publication of *Land Reform* put sixteen questions to the Clerk of the County Council with regard to Woodrow farm on issues such as the trade and condition of men prior to small holding cultivation and the degree to which the Catshill farmers were in financial arrears.

128 F.E. Green (1920) *Op Cit.* 171.

129 The belief that numerous applications would inundate councils proved somewhat wide of the mark in the Worcestershire case with just the one petition, the Catshill case.

¹³⁰F.E. Green (1920) *Op Cit.* 89.

¹³¹F. Impey, *Small Holdings in England* (London 1909) 8.

¹³²F.E. Green (1920), *Op Cit.* 138.

¹³³Impey placed greater importance in the pamphlet on the hiring of land rather than outright purchase which he felt was not an economically viable option for labourers. F. Impey, *Op Cit.* 5-7. As an interesting aside, Charles Masterman met with Impey, considered to be a 'veteran land reformer', at Catshill. Impey invited the rising Liberal politician to his house where upon Masterman saw, framed and hung, the original 'Three Acres and a Cow' pamphlet. C.F.G. Masterman (1907), *Op Cit.* 68. F.E. Green contests this history even further by suggesting Joseph Arch was the architect of the plan and that 'the genesis of the agitation which was afterwards known as the "three acres and a cow" cry of Mr Jesse Collings' could be found in these earlier protestations. F.E. Green (1920), *Op Cit.* 79.

¹³⁴The Birmingham Daily Mail may have proved overtly supportive of one of the most prominent M.P. in city after Chamberlain. *Birmingham Daily Mail* 29 January 1896.

¹³⁵'...the League [is] fast becoming a bureau, an organisation to which the rural population turned for advice and assistance in all matters affecting them'. Third Annual Report of the Rural Labourers' League (1892) 4; Eighth Annual Report (1897) 3.

¹³⁶Replies by the Clerk of the County Council on questions put by Mr Jesse Collins (*sic*). (n.d.) W.R.O. 224.102 BA 1422. Interestingly, to the question on the origin of the small holding scheme, the Clerk simply answers 'The Small Holdings Act 1892 was the origin'.

¹³⁷On the issue of soil, Masterman testified to the land being little more than fair second class. C.F.G. Masterman (1907), *Op Cit.* 84. Collings rated the land at the beginning of the experiment as poor but by the time he wrote *The Colonization of Rural Britain* in 1914 he ranked the land as 'very good and made so by intensive culture'. J. Collings, *The Colonization of Rural Britain: A complete scheme for the regeneration of British rural life* (London 1914) 211.

¹³⁸Replies by the Clerk of the County Council on questions put by Mr Jesse Collings (*sic*) (n.d.) W.R.O. 224.102 BA 1422.

¹³⁹An official letter to each of the small holders warning them about the late payments of instalments. S. Thornley, Clerk of the County Council. 30 September 1904. In a letter from Thornley to Kemp dated 13 October 1902, he noted that arrears had developed on Small Holdings No. 6, 21, 28 and 32. W.R.O. 224.102 BA 1422.

¹⁴⁰Letter from Clerk of Worcestershire County Council to Edwin Rutter. 13 October 1902. Thornley implores Rutter to act fast or fear some form of retribution. W.R.O. 224.102 BA 1422. 'I must ask you to pay the money which you owe to Mr Kemp [the Land Agent] and that you take steps to put your land in a satisfactory state of cultivation and that you inform him when you have done so...'

¹⁴¹Letter from Clerk of Worcestershire County Council to Edwin Rutter. 14 November 1902. W.R.O. 224.102 BA 1422. It is interesting that the best and worst examples of small holding cultivation were juxtaposed to each other, illustrating that careful management and good farming techniques could make the soil productive. However, this close spatial proximity perhaps lends itself to conspiracy theories and attempts to remove Rutter from the Catshill colony.

¹⁴²Further to his confession of financial hardship, he states he had not sub-let the farm, merely let his nephew take over some of the cultivation duties and that he was unable to keep pigs because of an occupation external to the holding that kept him away during the day. Letter from Edwin Rutter to the Clerk of Worcestershire County Council. W.R.O. 224.102 BA 1422.

¹⁴³A.W. Kemp to Mr S. Thornley 22 December 1902. Kemp believed 'it would be better for him and materially assist his neighbours in carrying on the proper cultivation of their holdings' if the council tidied up the property and found a new occupier.

¹⁴⁴Masterman was one among many who was acutely aware of this fact when he states that '...those who had not succeeded in getting on the land have wandered into the cities or fled across the sea'. C.F.G. Masterman (1907), *Op Cit.* 90.

Chapter Eight: Small Holdings and the Alleviation of Depression

8.1 Reinforcing the Local: Re-asserting Englishness

Small holdings represented an important step back from the inclination to generalise the English rural experience. By accepting difference at a sub-county and usually village-based level, owner occupancies could preserve the inherited traditions that shaped national culture by resuscitating rural life and thus preserve the love of national heterogeneity and not English universalisms. Despite indiscriminate resistance to the imposition of modernising solutions upon agriculture that could prompt James MacDonald to write farming has indeed become far more a game of science than of brute force', there existed a contradictory homogenising tendency within both pastoral and some reformist literature that depicted rural England as held within the imaginary realm with a geographic uniformity as readily as the modernising approaches that proved such an anathema to conservative English tastes and a singularity that intimated rural England was one and not many.¹ This geographic essentialising of rural England as uncovered in Section Two customarily depicted one specific region, the south, over others by employing icons of essentially lowland arable cultivation which were mapped out within agrarian geographies as symbolic of all England.² Despite a spatialised bias in the location of 'real' England shared by all ideologies, a plurality of bucolic imaginations upon the constituents of this idyll persisted, contributing to a variety of disparate representations of a rural homeland and the ordering of selected rural icons within. This reflected an individual authors position in space but also differing political stances. Thus we uncover readings of a rustic homeland that invoke aristocratic traditions in opposition to alternative egalitarian envisionments.³ Howard's essay on the relationship between farmers and the Conservative Party illustrates the point. In opposition to Thorold Rogers' democratic history, Howard erased the peasant land struggle from the mind, alternatively suggesting that continued support for the Tories amongst the farming community had roots in Medieval 'material self-interest' of vassals maintaining the powers of their lords.⁴

Geographic certainty may have been established for the various renditions of rural England, but within this imaginary and material space, the attachment to difference was still apparent. Intense localism was revered as English composite diversity was celebrated.⁵ For some critics, and Collings was one, the local was promoted as *real*, a more truthful narrative of rural material life than any national-level observation. As evidenced by the general immobility of the population, even within the railway age, the village community still acted as the spatial centrepiece of English rural life. Within this geographic realm we find a theoretical motivation behind the small holding plan to preserve the rural locale. Focusing the land reform

campaign on village co-operatives rather than grand state legislation, reinforced the importance of concomitant geographies encompassed in a broader national whole. A locale-sensitive approach recognised the agricultural experience was manifestly local rather than national or even regionally organised and therefore more suited to small-scale spatially limited solutions, such as farms operating a small farming philosophy.⁶ The nation benefited more from individual gain within a mutually supportive system than the *laissez-faire* approach to farming failure that sanctioned the continued contraction of the labouring classes. By attacking the causes of depression at the local level, Collings's plan offered a more realistic, more sincere solution for agriculture than the 'socialist lie' of land nationalisation by emphasising individual and geographically peculiar concerns.⁷

Farming was, in essence, a local experience, with the county town (or the nearest town with an agricultural fair) remaining 'the furthest point on the horizon'. Within reformist thinking, a distrust of the machinations of the state persisted not least because detailed local knowledge was lacking. Two Royal Commissions on agriculture had failed to serve the potentially useful function of agglomerating myriad local experiences through the production of reports that concealed the fundamental spatiality of depression. Therefore, the English countryside was built up of many locales which were critical components in a wider English national identity. The success of small holdings for idealists like Collings, was the recognition of spatial sensitivity in a re-assertion of Englishness, as well as an agrarian resolution. Land reform, as a palliative for agricultural depression, attempted to preserve the nature of specific locales by fixing the residue population to the soil to protect national composite diversity, and thus emphasize the intrinsicity of patriotism within agriculture. Yet, for others, it was precisely this parochialism that undermined English agricultural competitiveness. Foreign competition had 'to be faced' urged Roland Prothero, and reformers needed to establish a method to either circumvent this threat or confront the problem full on.⁸

Peasant farms were not spatially restrictive in their usefulness. Acting within another geographical layer, resistant to an imperial assumption of English national identity, they asserted the nation was firmly the sum of its parts and these constituents, the rural village traditions, needed to be restored to preserve the essence of the nation. The Condition of Rural England mantra was rehearsed: agrarian depression eroded the vitality of farming and consequently the cradle of nationhood. Englishness was not just a biological construction, but also a way of life, a mode of thinking, a cultural difference that had to be nurtured. The village represented the ideal nursery. Margaret Fitzsimmons proposes the shaping of national culture in space became especially meaningful within an urban/rural division during the

development of industrial capitalism. To Ruralist observers with an acute sensitivity to the disruption caused by farming failure, the essence of English national identity was distilled within the village, the highest elevation upon England's moral topography. Small holdings were swiftly appropriated as the answer to the problem of national cultural erasure by offering a viable hope of maintaining people in spaces least affected by modern, cosmopolitan capitalism. However, the England they sought to preserve was not based upon servile tenure, but the 'real', historic, tradition of the independent farmer.

8.2 The Implementation of Local Self-Determination

A considerable degree of spatial refinement is enacted by the Collings plan that places emphasis on *localism* as an organising philosophy. Collings and his acolytes firmly believed in the centrality of the village, so that by making community life more prosperous and attractive, emigration to towns and cities could be averted. Outlined in his evidence presented before the Select Committee on Small Holdings (1889-90) and later encapsulated within the 1892 Small Holdings Act, Collings's faith that facilities for the creation of owner occupied farms lay in a new system of local elected authorities, was based upon the belief that smaller councils possessed a greater awareness of local needs over the State.⁹ His proposals, defined in the 1887 Allotments Act, at the Select Committee and in the 1892 Small Holdings Act introduced by Henry Chaplin, the President of the Board of Agriculture, enabled a local authority to buy land for the purposes of allotments and small holding construction when requested by a group of ratepayers keen to convert to small holding principles.¹⁰ To ensure the availability of land, compulsory purchase powers would be invested in local councils. Though restrictions were initially placed on these powers with regard to allotments, legislation was less strict in regard to small holdings.¹¹ In fact Collings firmly, and controversially, encouraged the buying up of church land, with the almost heretical insinuation that a sacred space represented land on which a peasant Englishman could cultivate.¹² The origins of such thinking lay in the Irish Church Act which advocated the selling off of Church land. With between six and seven thousand new peasant proprietors created by such legislation, the Act was deemed successful. Murrough O' Brien alluded to a series of positive attributes as a result of the Irish scheme such as the creation of a property owning democracy and a cultivation of loyalty to the state.

They have...an incentive to thrift and industry which they had not before; and their ownership should be a factor in the production of contentment and loyalty to the state.¹³

However, in keeping with his more concessionary nature, Collings was concerned all attempts to secure the conversion to owner occupancy through voluntary agreement had been exhausted before compulsory powers were employed.¹⁴ His annoyance was understandable, therefore, that the law was deprecated as a failure because of the negligible use of the compulsory clauses. It remained his stated intention that local authorities were to 'secure land, whenever possible, by voluntary agreement' rather than by intimidation. By 1906 Collings had revised his views significantly with regard to local authorities and the responsibility for small holding provision, chiefly due to a reluctance by most county councils to purchase land. Instead he favoured a large central body that would have greater funds for the purpose of land procurement.¹⁵

Conscious of the fact the labouring classes could not afford to purchase land from local councils, Collings proposed that a system of State assistance in the form of loans should be implemented to enact any potential small holding legislation.¹⁶ Under the new scheme the prospective small holder would provide one-quarter of the initial capital investment, whilst the remaining three-quarters of the purchase money would be granted by the local authority, which would in turn reimburse the cost from central government. For the 1892 Small Holdings Act, the proposed one-quarter contribution from the new small holder was reduced to one fifth. In 1906, Lord Onslow, appointed by the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries to inquire into the land question, reported back to the Interdepartmental Committee that the initial down payment, even at 20%, was proving too restrictive for the honest, hard-working labourer.¹⁷ It was his recommendation that the figure be reduced to one-eighth of the original outlay. Collings, now appreciative of his own miscalculations pre-empted the impact of the Onslow Report by going one step further, advocating the full advancement of purchase money by County Councils, to be paid back in yearly instalments.¹⁸ In 1908 an attempt was made to convert his recommendation into law. This unsuccessful amendment to the 1892 Small Holdings Act stipulated that county councils at their discretion could reduce the one-fifth payment to any figure they deemed acceptable, with the possibility, in exceptional cases relating to men possessing 'good character' and the skills of a 'good cultivator', of removing the capital requirement altogether.¹⁹ The enlightened approach to land reform adopted by Worcestershire County Council was evident in their flexibility over the one-fifth payment, frequently advancing money to the small holder, or, in other cases, postponing loan repayments. Collings was quoted in *The Times* as stating that 'in Worcestershire they could see men who had lived for twelve years on absolute prosperity, on their little holdings, and the whole land question was solved'.²⁰

Opposition was strong to both notions of compulsory purchase and the system of land loans.²¹ S.B.L. Druce's comments at the Select Committee were probably the most critical of loans, chiefly because the small holder in effect became a tenant of the local authority, thus replacing one landlord with another, concluding that 'it is a very imprudent proposition, and an impolitic one to advance money'. Druce contended ownership rather than rental was crucial through its encouragement of independent culture and patient even minds.²² The provision of land suffered a near-devastating blow following the 1894 Parish Councils Act, which was part of the wider Local Government Act introduced by Sir Henry Fowler. The Act afforded opportunities to obtain land for allotments by empowering parish councils to that end. Councils remained resistant to the idea, quite probably reflecting the social composition of the councils.²³ The Act also proved restrictive through a failure to secure a right of appeal for a potential small holder from a ruling of the parish council. Unsurprisingly the Act was largely neglected as a route to reform. The Rural Labourers' League reported that it had almost had to cease activities but for a reversion back to the Allotments Act of 1887. However, employing the 1887 Act after an initial rejection for land under the 1894 Act proved expensive and time consuming, perhaps even forcing the abandonment of locally formulated schemes by disillusioned labourers.²⁴

To further re-inforce the local geography behind the small holding plan, the Rural Labourers' League offered a sensitive approach that favoured self-help schemes formulated within each local community rather than enforcing a standard route of land reform. Representatives of the League would be invited by village labourers to advise on the potential of allotment and small holding conversion. These agents, invariably recruited from the labouring classes, reflected the popular trend of taking campaigns for reform to the farm worker as exemplified by the 'Red Vans' of the English Land Restoration League. Thereafter, a branch of the Rural Labourers' League was usually instituted to assuage the conversion of locally devised plans. The deploying of labouring agents removed charges of a new mutation of paternalism by offering a less patronizing tone, issuing advice in a language that could be readily digested. In the Third Annual Report of the League (1892), a figure of over one thousand village visits was advanced.²⁵ Each annual report listed a group of villages in which the Rural Labourers' League's role had been more than advisory, offering practical assistance in securing land, such as at Hednesford where in 1889 the League assured procurement of forty acres for allotment purposes. Mapping the spatial distribution of the more intensive activities reveals the demand for land reform as offered by the League occurred in a number of distinct clusters, perhaps reflecting a word-of-mouth dissemination of reformist knowledge. The most obvious and earliest

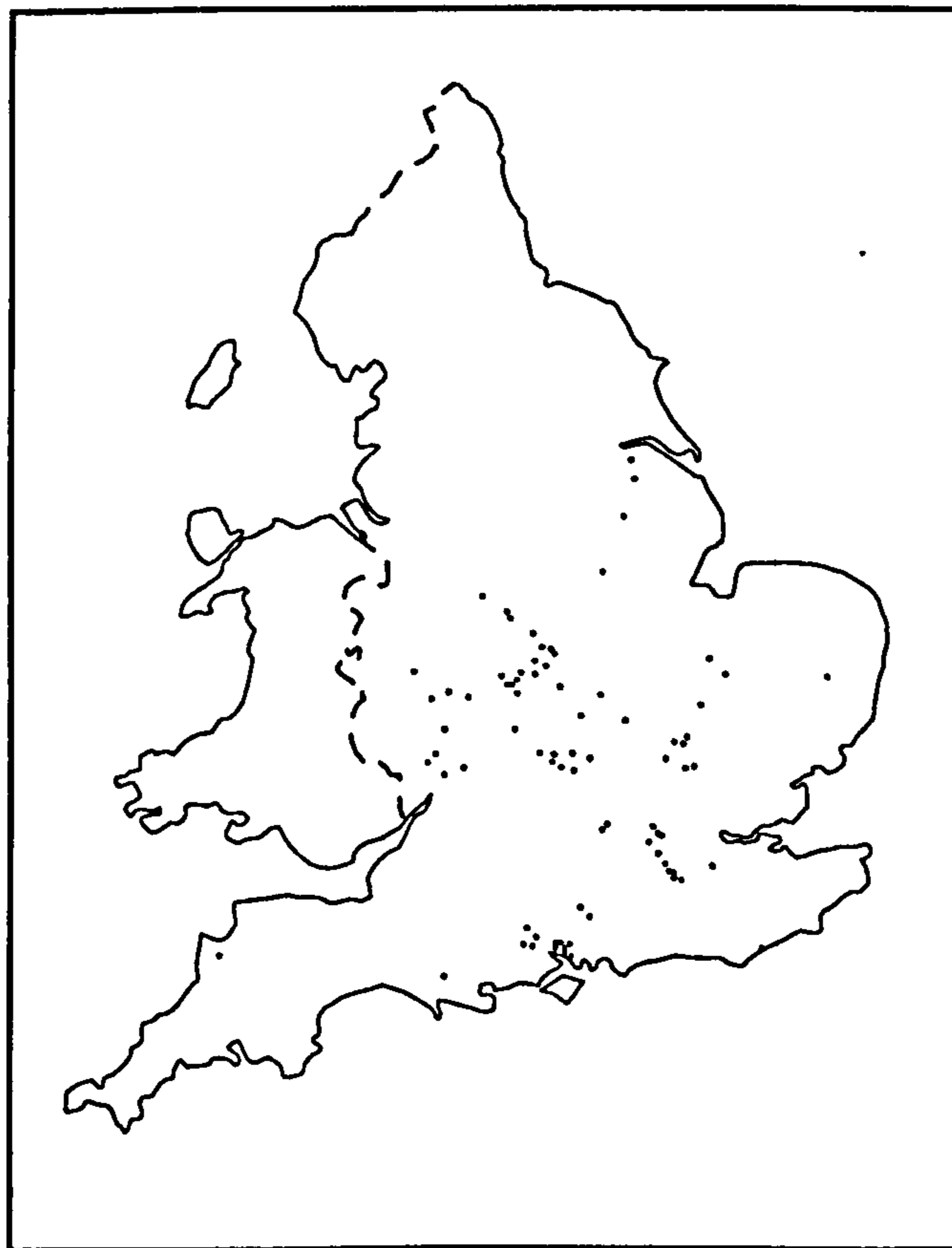
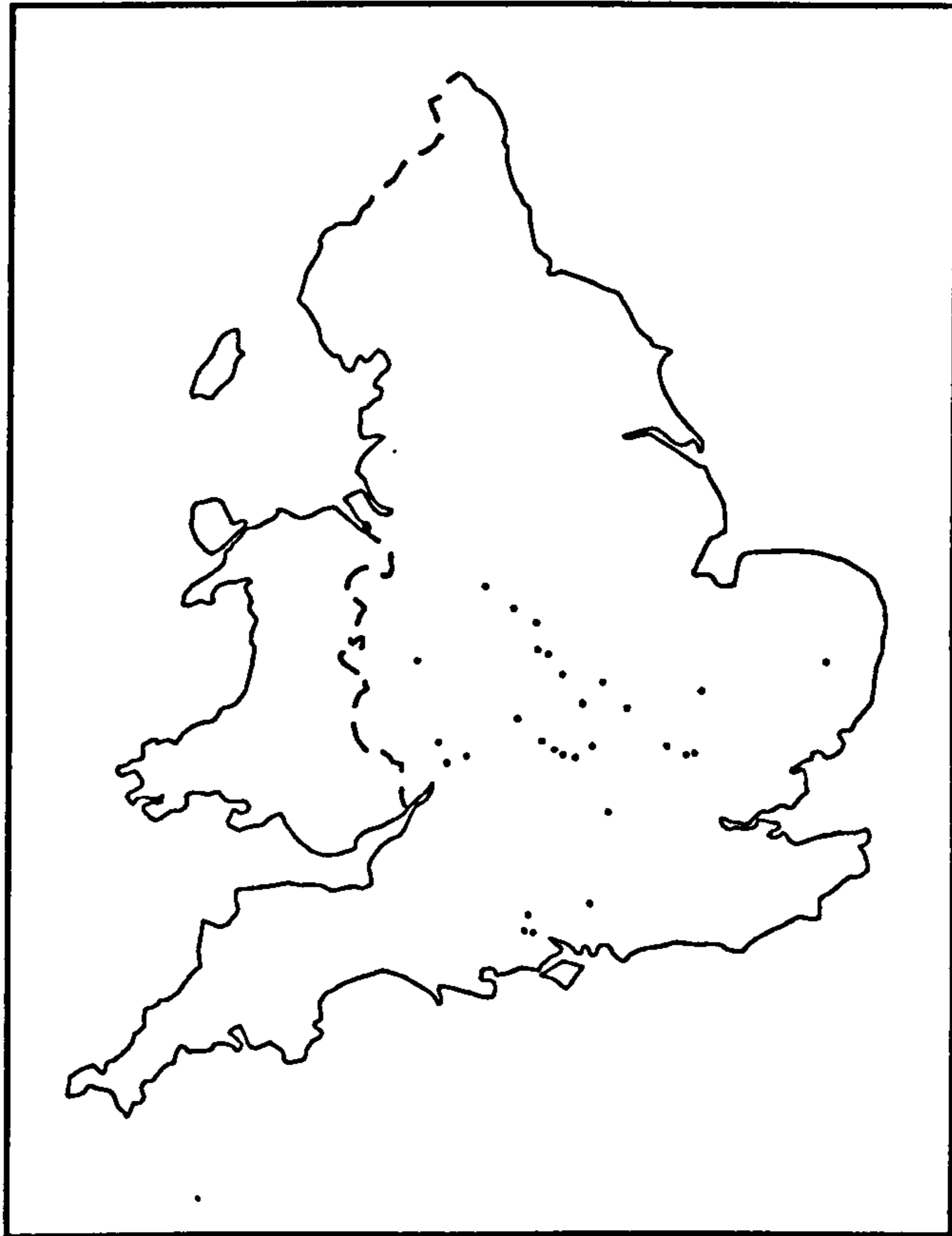


Figure 12: Small Holding and Allotment Schemes Implemented by the Rural Labourers' League by 1890 and 1892

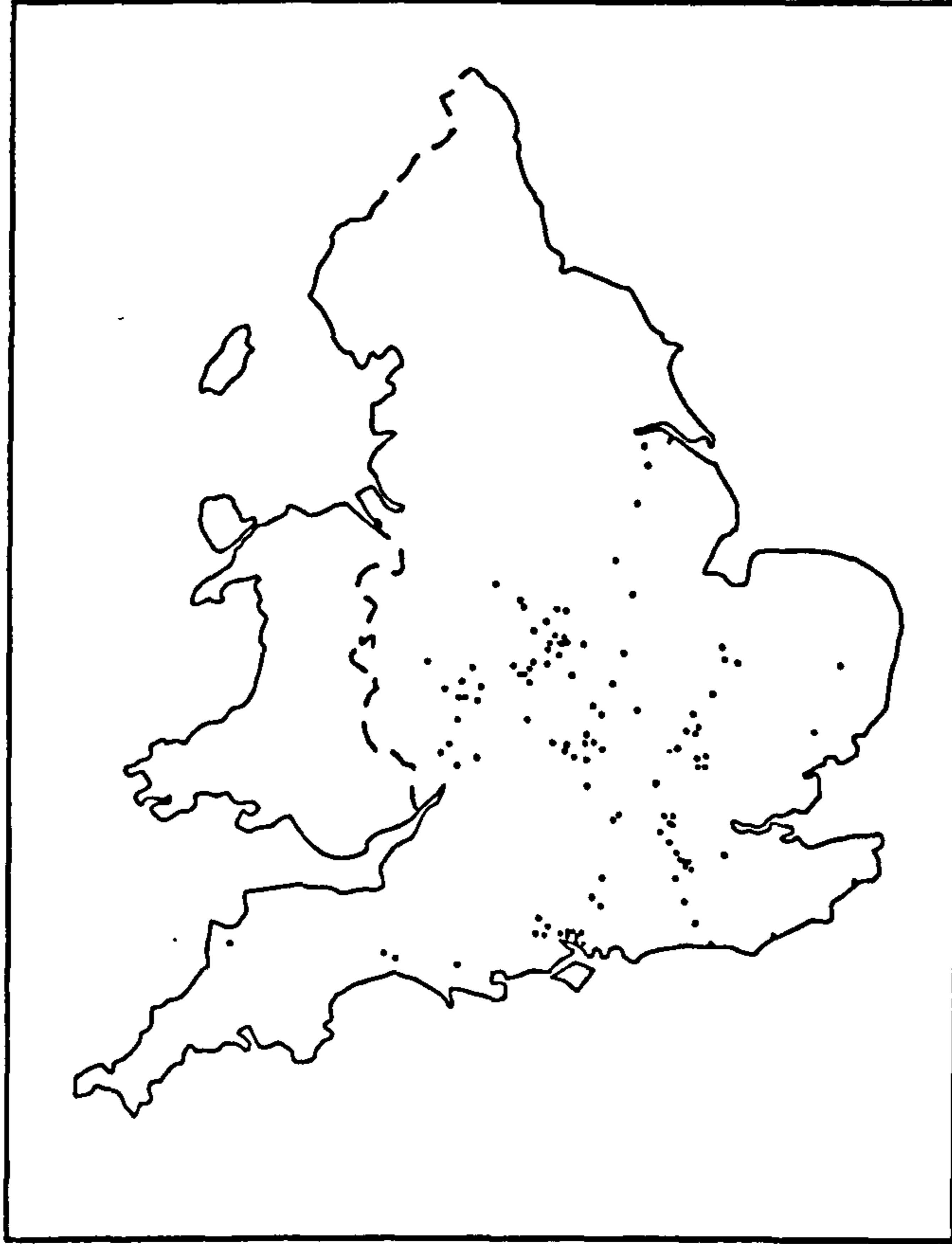


Figure 13: Small Holding and Allotment Schemes Implemented by the Rural Labourers' League by 1894

Source: The Annual Reports of the Rural Labourers' League (1889-1901)

assemblage arises in an arc immediately south and east of Birmingham, the geographical heart of England, though not its spiritual homeland. Apart from the fact that the campaign origins lay in the Birmingham area two other reasons for the popularity of the League's work are suggested. Firstly, the Warwickshire labourers had a recent history for agitation as typified by Joseph Arch's National Agricultural Labourers' Union referred to earlier. As the League's schemes were dependent on labourer initiative rather than the landowning benevolence, this explanation is perhaps of greatest significance. Secondly, Worcestershire offered itself to peasant proprietorship because of the suitability of such holdings in fruit and market gardening production. This encouragement was further enhanced by the County Council's tacit approval of land reform as a solution to continued agricultural depression and the rural exodus.

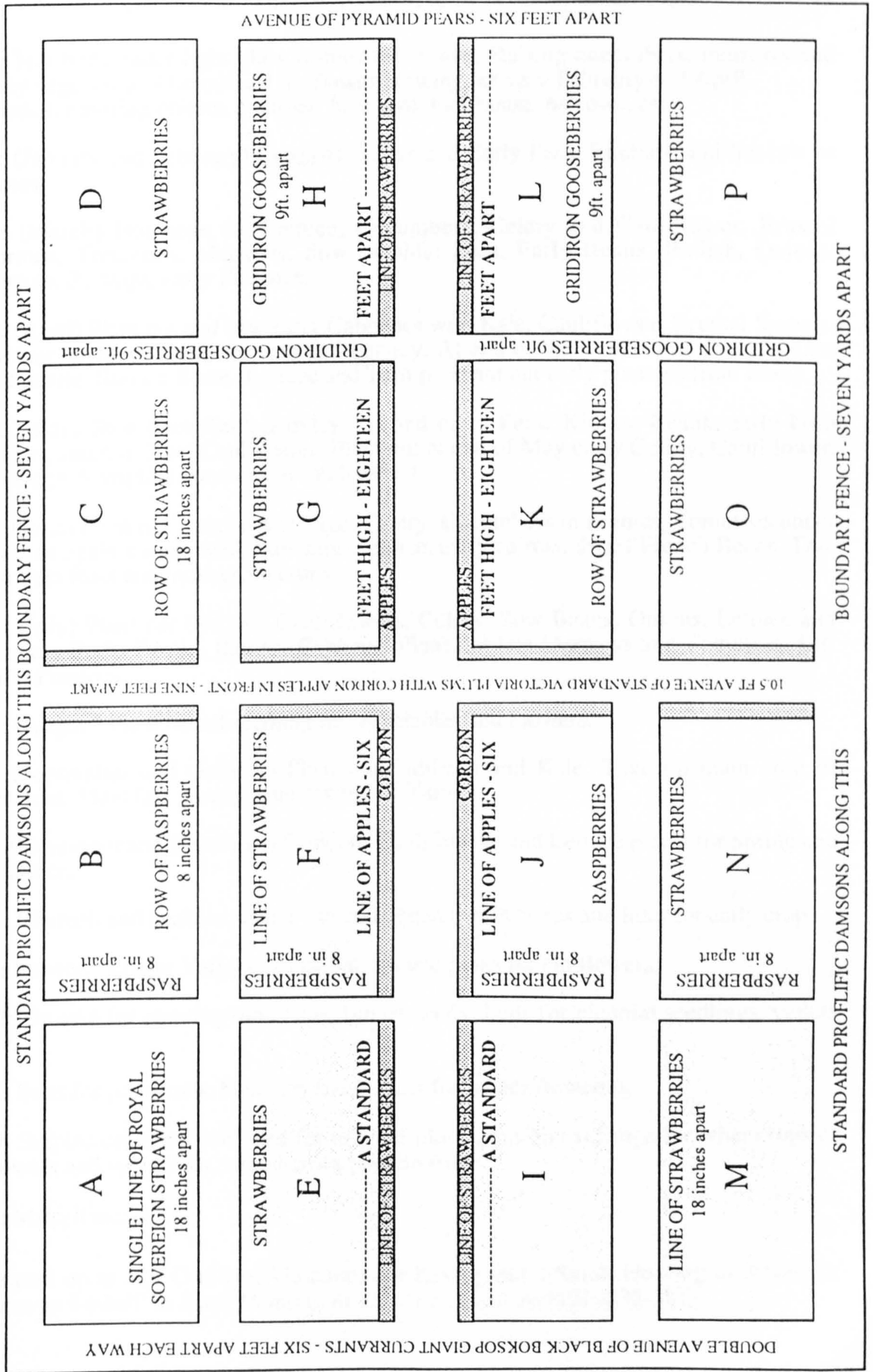
8.3 Small Holdings and the Response to Perceived Depression

Reformist schemes were typically formulated in response of a democratic social re-orientation. The agrarian-led movement alternatively responded to *perceived* notions of depression, although a more egalitarian geography that recognised land as a national and not aristocratic possession was striven for as the only viable solution to agrarian depression.²⁶ Diagnoses of agrarian depression were manifold and varied. Inevitably, this produced a rash of antidotes and prescriptions that reflected political biases and a lack of an unequivocal understanding of the origins of failure. Both Royal Commissions on Agricultural Depression offered an interminable list of solutions that attached equal significance to academic debates on 'bi-metalism' and more practical matters such as the sale of adulterated goods.²⁷ Surprisingly, small holdings were ignored by both Royal Commissions on Depression as potential remedies, perhaps reflecting the seizure of investigative remits by the land owning interest, yet the clamour for land reform to cure depression was perhaps greater than any other panacea.²⁸ Indeed, the Richmond Commission firmly advocated the consolidation of farms to increase profit margins. The front-page article for the *Rural World* of 23 February 1894, disagreed with the judgement that rent reduction was the only cure for depression, stating that 'we do not believe this [sentiment]; in many parts, even if the rent were reduced to nil, no living profits could be made'.²⁹ Evidence testified to the profitability of small holdings during a depression. S. Williamson claimed 'the farmers who now prosper, work assiduously with their own hands'.³⁰ William Gibbons could even offer the Select Committee on Small Holdings the statistical proof that on a small farm of twenty-five acres, 'a very good income indeed' could be obtained, with annual profits in the region of one hundred pounds. (Appendix 1)³¹ Writing many years later in 1915, John D. Godwin firmly believed

that a small holding of just one and a half acres, half the size of the Collings proposal, could be profitably managed if the small holder followed his detailed plan. This expression of almost 'pre-fabricated farming' could potentially return an annual profit in the region of £60 at contemporary prices, enabling the small holder to recover his or her initial capital outlay for construction and stocking. Furthermore the new owner occupier consequently possessed assets based upon crops, plants, sheds, tools and frames of approximately £140. As the illustration and annotation demonstrate, Godwin proposed a cash crop production system using fruit and flowers for ready sale to nearby urban markets.³² There is, however, little evidence of his scheme being put into operation. The single most obvious benefit for this style of intensive cultivation was that it raised production levels through the increased and concentrated application of manure to soils.

Jesse Collings's interpretation, though acknowledging his widespread involvement within the agrarian cause was heavily influenced by an additional abstraction of farming hearsay, myth and despair. Despite the cultural basis behind many of the wider perceived benefits of the introduction of *petite culture* philosophy, Collings situated his small holding ideal with a carefully formulated alternative economic framework that moved beyond capitalist accumulation to a revised vision of peasant systems built upon reciprocal trading and small, internally defined markets rather than large-scale international capital structures.³³ Small holdings could in effect sharpen national distinctions at a time when identity had become a Victorian obsession, by developing markets that turned away from the increasing globalisation of capital with small holdings supplying urban areas with food products in return for manufactured goods. To an extent, the peasant lifestyle did away with much of the need for marketplaces in any case. The small holding scheme presented a landscape of transformation that did not involve an erasure of the labouring population. Howkins has stated that much agricultural concern regarding farm bankruptcy arose in the 1890s, yet Collings was one of the first to comprehend the wider implications of a prolonged agricultural depression, making comments to that effect as early as the mid-1880s. Wilkes placed his historical reading of the 'awakening' of the peasant route back to profitable farming even earlier at the end of the 1870s, before the full extent of depression was really known.³⁴ Two implications of depression concerned Collings directly. The first related to the rural exodus with its obvious implications for a healthy and productive labour force. A second ramification was the added urgency of returning the land back into the hands of the rightful owners, principally as a method of reducing out-migration and increasing production levels as outlined in his contribution to *The Radical Programme* in which Collings expressed a need for a return to historic methods of peasant proprietorship as a panacea to late nineteenth-

Figure 14: Plan of a Small Holding of 1.5 Acres



STANDARD PROLIFIC DAMSONS ALONG THIS BOUNDARY FENCE - SEVEN YARDS APART

AVENUE OF PYRAMID PEARS - SIX FEET APART

GRIDIRON GOOSEBERRIES 9ft. apart

GRIDIRON GOOSEBERRIES 9ft. apart

10.5 FT AVENUE OF STANDARD VICTORIA PLUMS WITH CORDON APPLES IN FRONT - NINE FEET APART

BOUNDARY FENCE - SEVEN YARDS APART

STANDARD PROLIFIC DAMSONS ALONG THIS

DOUBLE AVENUE OF BLACK BOKSOP GIANT CURRANTS - SIX FEET APART EACH WAY

Figure 15: Scheme for Planting and Arranging the Plots

To be used in conjunction with the plan on previous page for a 1.5 acre Small Holding.

A: Hot beds under light glass frames (6ft x 4ft). Raising cucumbers, marrows and early vegetables. Also utilised for flower growing between February and April. Sheds for storing onions, potatoes, beet root, tool house, barrows, etc.

B: (January and February) Longpod Beans and Early Peas. Rhubarb and Seakale in boxes.

C: (March) Hot beds for Lettuce, Cucumbers, Celery and Cauliflower, Brussel Sprouts, Tomatoes, Marrows. Sow outside: Peas, Early Beans, Radish, Onions, Carrots, Parsnips, early Potatoes.

D: (April) Plant out and sow early Cabbages with Kale, Cauliflower, Brussel Sprouts, another sowing of peas, carrots and Parsley. At end of the month sow Dwarf Beans and Scarlet Runner Beans, Lettuce and Turnips. Plant out early potatoes from boxes.

E: (May) Sow Beet Root, Parsley, second early Peas, Kidney Beans, early horn Carrot, autumn Giant Cauliflower. Plant out at end of May early Celery, Cauliflower, Cabbage. transplant tomatoes to south aspect.

F: (June) Plant out Lettuce, Cabbage, Celery. Cucumbers in Frames, Tomatoes under glass or against south wall. Sow more lettuce, early carrots, dwarf French Beans. Thin out Beet Root and most green crops.

G: (July) Plant out Sprouts, Cauliflowers, Celery. Sow Beans, Onions, Lettuce and Parsley, Early Turnip, Radish, Cabbage. Plant out late Marrows and Tomatoes. Lift early Potatoes.

H: (August) Plant out all seedling for Vegetables and Flowers.

I: (September and October) Plant out Cabbage and Kale. Take up main crop of Potatoes. Plant late greens. Late sowing of Turnips.

J: (November and December) Plant out Cauliflowers and Lettuce plants for Spring and Summer.

K: Rhubarb and Seakale planted out and covered with boxes and litter for early crop.

L: Flowers. Border Varieties of carnations and pinks for cut flowers.

M: Ground for planting out choice flower seeds. Beds for biennial seedlings, violets etc.

N: Beds for perennials, biennials and Violets for winter flowering.

O: Surplus crops not provided for in other plots, or as an exchange for other crops of flowers and vegetables, strawberries or bush fruits.

P: Miscellaneous

(Based upon J.D. Godwin, 'Guidance for Laying-out a Small Holding of About an Acre-and-a-half' in *Small Holdings and Cottage Gardens* [1915] 35-38)

century depression.³⁵ Jesse Collings feared depopulation and the concentration of ownership would combine to create a future, more fractious rural milieu. J.L. Green, Collings's biographer and close companion at the Rural Labourers' League, expressed this concern in a damning article on the corruption of monopolistic land ownership in the *Rural World*.

*...we have today a spectacle which cannot fail to create an amount of alarm in the minds of thoughtful and intelligent men - a spectacle of a discontented rural England, whose sons are largely divorced from the land of their birth, the land itself being poverty-stricken from the want, principally, of adequate cultivation, and an adequate number of cultivators.*³⁶

The reformist campaign was built upon similar motivations to the Condition of Rural England debate, attesting to the primary industrial importance of agriculture. In the preface to *Land Reform*, which was intended as an agenda of reform led by the Rural Labourers' League, Collings extended the influence of farming to claim that agriculture represented more than the economic mainstay of British trade, being the true basis 'on which the real welfare of a country can be securely established'.³⁷ This declaration furnished a number of pre-conceptions opponents held towards his campaign: namely, a refusal to accept the displacement of agriculture as a key concomitant in the British economy. A return to widespread, small-scale, owner-occupancies was perceived to be wildly anachronistic as Britain hurtled towards a modern urban-industrial future. Collings's entrenchment, which he clearly saw as a positive rather than negative attribute is visible in his resistance to the Balfour administration's preference for a more prosperous, *urban* Britain.³⁸ Instead, for progressive Ruralists as typified by the membership of the Rural Labourers' League, trade had to be 'governed by the production of soil both at home and abroad'.³⁹ This conclusion was derived from three factors. Firstly, capital investment in land yielded higher profits in the long term, and more people could share in this wealth through mass ownership. Secondly, home trade through the retail of agrarian produce to urban markets provided a more secure, less fickle economic environment than foreign trading, though these limited retail opportunities could be only really enjoyed by farms in close proximity to urban areas. Stirton envisaged a time when the New World would be so substantially populated, indigenous farmers would be content to supply home markets rather than trade internationally. At this future date, the intra-national small holding economy would become independent and fully functional.⁴⁰ The third and final factor behind reverting back to a land-based economy engaged in a rural eugenics debate. Small holding schemes subsumed eugenicist thinking into

their plans to promote health and national physical strength as cherished assets which could only be enriched by closer contact with the soil.⁴¹

Low land prices may have condemned the failure of the semi-feudal land system within modern farming economies, yet they offered the best opportunity to implement small farming techniques and map out more egalitarian rural futures.⁴² Collings seized the moment to suggest that as many as four million people could be returned to the soil as land lay abandoned and worthless.⁴³ 'With land cheap and labour abundant' proclaimed the first *Rural World* front-page, 'we have this enormous trade [small-scale comestibles] within reach, needing only the adoption of our system to its requirements'.⁴⁴ Within the closed and integral economies of peasant proprietorship, farming could finally be removed from the continuous boom and bust cycle.⁴⁵ However, small holdings represented more than a panacea for depression. They offered a route in parallel with progressive Ruralist beliefs, to a self-contained rural environment, quite distinct and separated from the city.

8.4 *The Reconstitution of Domestic England and the Medieval Haven Myth*

Within an essentially domestic landscape with emphasis placed on individual toil and a legislative structure that supported a degree of democratic parochial self-determination, the small holding not only symbolised a removal from patriarchal shackles but also an emancipation from the city. Collings and Chamberlain's wider programme of 'domestic Radicalism' sought a tentative revival of the Medieval rustic haven by reasserting the self-dependent village as the notion of reliance had been central within the historic common field system. The village spatial order was closer to the Medieval haven myth so earnestly longed for with the discomfort of depression and thereby appealed to that most stable of English tastes: tradition. The Hon. Evelyn Cecil lucidly summarised the need for a revival of village life. 'If the village is again to become a living force', she stated some years after Collings's campaign in 1921, 'something of this old self-centred spirit must be kept alive'.⁴⁶ Inside the proposed parochial geographic order, the re-creation of the old peasantry would remain the central objective.⁴⁷ Self-contained villages capable of preserving the purity of English racial lineages were obligatory. Agrarian historians may have difficulty in establishing definitions and dimensions of the English peasantry, but for many Victorians, and Collings was one, the ascription of a perfunctory designation was not a problem.⁴⁸ Indeed ownership was not an absolute criteria, unlike the size of the property.⁴⁹ For Collings, the peasant represented an ancient small holder who possessed rights and privileges over common land as 'an adjunct of their ordinary means of subsistence'.⁵⁰ Rather than the multi-occupationalist Mick Reed most recently asserts, Collings's peasant firmly belonged to a cultivating class that worked

the soil in an independent or semi-independent system quite distinct from the wage-receiving agricultural labourer. The yeoman farmer was merely a higher class of peasant proprietor who had been largely subsumed into the tenant farmer classes. The difference between the two was blurred and in *Land Reform*, merely consigned to a footnote.

*The peasantry and yeoman were so much allied, the principles of their land tenure were so much alike, they were so united in interests and in action that, for historical purposes, they must be looked upon as part of the same body.*⁵¹

The yeoman had his (and the definition was overwhelmingly masculine) origins in the ancient copyholders who held land in servile tenure from a local landlord. Services rendered included ploughing and tilling practices which were 'copied' or enrolled on the rolls of the manor, emphasising a bond to the local landowner and contrary to Victorian popular myth, not the soil. Increasingly, landlordist legislation turned common freedom into strict severalty with the reduction of the yeoman farmer to the status of rent paying tenant and the peasant proprietor to a destitute wage-earner.⁵² However, if legislation had been employed to destroy the noble farming classes, then it could be manipulated to restore the peasantry.⁵³ The rhetoric of Jesse Collings was never more fervent than when he addressed the Select Committee on Small Holdings on the issue.

*It has taken generations to destroy the peasantry, and the effect of anything we may resolve upon must be gradual in the restoration of it, but it is high time to begin.*⁵⁴

His legislative intentions were made clear in his contribution to *The Radical Programme*, the literary forum for Chamberlain's anti-Gladstonian ideology, 'for their own welfare and that of the nation, they [the new peasantry] must be enabled to live on the land and by it'.⁵⁵ Believing that it was time for Britain to follow other democratic countries of Europe and the New World in abolishing the old tri-partite system of landlord, tenant and farmer, Collings suggested a re-invented regime of yeoman and peasant offered a financially viable and socially just future through the production of between fifty and sixty million pounds worth of small article foodstuffs, with *all* profits being ploughed back into the soil rather than lost through wastage that was commonly depicted in reformist ideology as the landlords pocket.⁵⁶ With peasants firmly installed back on the land, agrarian communities or more generally, villages could once more become co-dependent. The subtle difference between the agrarian democracies of Collings and Utopianist communities like Millthorpe, was the farmer fed himself, rather than share produce within a collective, maintaining the independent peasant tradition.

In essence, with the exception of trade with urban markets to ensure an income, agrarian small holding proposals retreated from the inevitable slide into a capitalist world system that many within British agriculture without the barriers of competitive advantage and Protection had tried to resist. The inherent dialectical tensions resident in the Collings plan rehearsed a common denominator of the Condition of Rural England discourse, namely the difference between rural material reality and abstract *fantasy-rural* transposing Medieval icons of bucolic, paradisiacal settings into a late-nineteenth-century context. The economic treatise of Thorold Rogers offering credence to the Medieval rustic haven depiction by idealising history, plainly sought the reconstitution of rural England within a similar sentimental longing. Even amongst landlord apologists, the growing sense of the Medieval period as a 'golden age' was infectious. Such a celebratory view was also shared by one of the more conservative farming critics of the day, Roland Prothero: 'the first half of the fifteenth century most nearly realized the peasants dream of Arcadia'.⁵⁷ In essence Collings's vision is one of practical agrarian arcadianism: evoking the English landscape tastes for decorum and morality to combat the destruction of depression and the spiritual loss from an abandonment of the soil.⁵⁸ The tension lies in the fact that Collings rationalises 'real' English space within his economic solution concurrent to his imposition of idyllic judgements upon the same location without seemingly differentiating between the abstract and the palpable. W.J. Keith contends, land offered permanence, and with this a sense of history.⁵⁹ Collings, guided by his own brand of progressivism, would have undoubtedly been the last to concede the countryside some how represented a museum of English life, a repository for ancestral roots, yet he also conforms to late-Victorian urges to maintain a tangible link with a national heritage.⁶⁰ A potential tension existed between an historical essentialisation of the peasant and a disregard of subtle local nuances, that were not only shaped by culture, but also by the physical landscape that predetermined agricultural methods.⁶¹ For small holdings to be successful, an emphasis needed to be placed on specific local geographies. The vision of Collings and the rural Labourers' League overcame this problem by encouraging the active involvement of potential small holders from the inception of a local land tenure conversion, such as the petitioning of local authorities for land through to the setting up of village based Small Holding Committees, at which grievances, suggestions and the dissemination of new methods could take place.

Though there was an obvious demand to own land, whether the securing of a self-contained village was a central objective of the labourer appears a 'given' assumption within the campaign. Alternatively, many labourers deserted the farm because of better wages obtainable elsewhere. Bowley noted that in 1914 a clear

division in wages persisted, not only on a north/south axis but also between industrial and remote agrarian areas, feeding rural resentment to low wages.⁶² The obligation to preserving a sense of community and parochial identity was evidently weak and unattractive beyond the dinner tables of the intellectual and political elites, simply because it failed to stop the rural exodus. Collings's deep conviction towards a notional rural community-based Utopia reveals an obsessional pursuit of this theoretical ideal down to the finest spatial scale by actively focusing on new, purpose built farmsteads located centrally in a village nucleus.⁶³ At the most micro-scale, Collings was intent on ensuring a sense of place remained undisturbed. Whether such sentiments were ever felt by many who had never left village confines is debatable. In the absence of intellectual discourse, recognition of an emotional *heimat* may not have been recognised until extrication from a particular environment, be it permanent or temporary. However the degree to which this thinking was misplaced is difficult to ascertain and cannot be firmly established from the numbers of conversions to small holding, particularly in the light of the obstructionist tactics of many local councils.

With the creation of peasant holdings and a reassurance of a vibrant village future, Collings hoped the rural exodus could be stemmed. Small holdings attacked the root of the problem: pauperism. Divorce from the soil was part of an inevitable decline for the labouring classes that had necessitated the need for the parish workhouse.⁶⁴ Evidence placed before the Select Committee on Small Holdings contended that occupational ownership provided such an attractive alternative to the workhouse, that the chances of retaining people on the soil would be increased dramatically.⁶⁵ Furthermore, peasant proprietorship was preferable to the laying down of pasture, the popular knee-jerk reaction to distress.⁶⁶ Outhwaite took exception to this pastoral trend upon the 'great estates' as an inefficient, unproductive response, especially against the backdrop of a demand for land. Further to this, the damning conclusions inside the Report on the Decline in the Agricultural Population of Great Britain (1906) suggested that in rural areas across the whole of Britain, 'grassing down' exacerbated depression and the rural exodus.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, small holdings were not a consensus alternative. P.A. Graham in a detailed study of rural depopulation found little encouragement in the division of land, certainly in remote rural districts, where his evidence suggested the demand for allotments remained low.⁶⁸ Benefits for the full-time, as opposed to casual or inconsistent, labourer were minimal, and for Graham at least, insufficient to persuade the irresolute worker to maintain his or her place on the soil.

The truth is that an allotment in a purely rural district comes to be neither more or less than a bad substitute for payment in land. A labourer who

*earns only a matter of twelve shillings a week will grasp at it as a means of staving off absolute starvation.*⁶⁹

Graham's greatest criticism of small holding culture attacked an apparent lack of scientific method, contributing to perceived agricultural backwardness subsumed by ruthless foreign competition.⁷⁰ However, claims that small holdings failed to provide proper forums for the exchange of new and scientific methods were rather unconvincing, not least because the paternalist approach to agriculture had patently discouraged any form of rural education and had equally excluded informed debate.⁷¹ Indeed, the Royal Commission on Agricultural Education of 1887, chaired by Sir Richard Paget suggested farm-based education was severely lacking in the United Kingdom, remaining some distance behind the continental experience, particularly in Germany which possessed, according to C.M. Aikman, the 'most complete and highly developed system'.⁷²

Collings had a partial solution to the problem. Parallel to the development of owner occupancy farmsteads there would be a greater provision of elementary schools, offering a specific rural education to encourage the young to stay on the land whilst asserting difference from the city. In 1896, Collings visited France on a fact finding mission, returning with the positive conclusion that agricultural schools had done much to enhance the small holding cause. Indeed, such schools offered the best possibilities for the dissemination of scientific knowledge.⁷³ Inappropriate education placing emphasis on the ability to read books before reading nature had been blamed for instilling a distaste for agricultural labour amongst the rural youth, with the logical conclusion that this had in part encouraged the migration of the young. Anna Brown noted how the distrust for education not only existed at the level of the tenant farmer, but had also filtered down to the general rural population. One old labourer's widow reported that 'education is the root of all evil' adding with conviction 'thank God, I won't never be educated'.⁷⁴ To overcome this problem, the new community-based schools provided a vocational tuition, emphasising horticulture, nature study and the infusion of a love of the soil. Schools had also to demonstrate the patriotic duties and responsibilities of the agriculturalists as an English citizen. Ruralist education potentially offered a more useful approach than the 'unintelligible pedantry' that filled the country child with thoughts beyond the village.⁷⁵ A new school infrastructure was not required, only 'pig-sties and foul-pens' for practical instruction, thus reducing implementation costs significantly.⁷⁶ Unfortunately for Collings, Parliament rejected his Agricultural Education in Elementary Schools Bill of 1905, though his thinking inspired the Rural Labourers' League education campaign. Once again Collings felt betrayed by Irish politicians who three times obstructed his Bill despite the fact that Ireland possessed a rural education system similar to approach

that he coveted. Lacking bitterness, Collings also offered support to the proposals of the Education Department the following year for evening instruction suitable for farm labourers.⁷⁷ The school would thus provide a unifying function across the whole of the village community.

8.5 *The Transfusion of Continental Ideas into 'Little England'*

To reinforce the parochial geography behind occupational ownership, certain co-operative techniques required mobilisation. For inspiration Collings drew heavily on continental methods of shared production and village-based agricultural credit societies, thus revealing a number of connections with wider European debates on land ownership and the supra-nationality of the peasant ideal. His experience of continental techniques seemed a 'vindication of what the proposed British agriculture [system] should set out to achieve', that peasant proprietorship worked best in a co-operation, though this need not be applied in association with socialist ideology.⁷⁸ Co-operative agriculture had undoubtedly subverted the causes of depression as the reformed Danish farming industry demonstrated. To assure individual financial viability, Danish farmers tended to become members of local, autonomous co-operatives which emphasized community action and the ancient tradition of the communal agrarian village.⁷⁹ Based upon dairying and livestock practices, Danish co-operatives possessed considerable powers for fixing prices with retailers, overcoming the usual small farmer problems regarding the purchase of machinery and foodstuffs in bulk. Further success ensued by a drift towards freehold peasant farms in opposition to *tenant* small holdings (*livsfæste*) as the table below illustrates.⁸⁰ The overall increase in the number of farms reflected a successful enactment of state legislation that not only attempted to increase the number of freeholds but also ensured that levels of peasant farming did not diminish. Table 9 below illustrates this shift to individual ownership amongst small farms.

Year	No. of Farms	Proportion Freehold	% Freehold
1850	66 841	45 000	67.3
1860	69 094	56 000	81.5
1873	70 959	62 000	87.4
1885	71 678	66 000	92.1

Table 9: Number of Peasant Holdings in Denmark

Source: Reports From H. M. Representatives Abroad on the Position of Peasant Proprietors in the Countries in Which They Reside (1891) Inclosure no. 3, Denmark.

Collings was not alone in his study of European systems of land ownership. Rider Haggard attached great significance to Danish methods of production and the Select Committee on Small Holdings produced a report on the various systems of peasant holdings as a guideline for approaches in Britain. France, with over three million peasant farmers would have, for many, provided the most lucid and informative study, yet despite many fact finding tours in consultation with the French peasantry, Collings felt Denmark and Belgium provided definitive models, with France inspiring more abstract ideas of nationhood and spirituality.⁸¹ Whether this bias was racial is never made clear by Collings. The *Rural World* of November 1896 reported that the French peasantry, described as peaceable and thrifty, represented the backbone of the nation and not the city-dweller. Indeed in this very English reading of the French relationship between the rural and the urban, the city is promoted as a source of unrest, even to the extent of having 'led France into deep trouble'.⁸² From Sweden, Collings was attracted to the idea of small holding colonies, with the local organisational structure in an English and Welsh context being replaced by reformed parish councils.⁸³ From Germany, he made allusions to the struggle for land and liberty from servile tenure initiated by Stein and Hardenburg at the beginning of the nineteenth-century, with his own campaign. He was appalled that Britain still lacked a *bauern* class, farming on units of up to 250 acres, while in Germany such peasants tilled 75% of the soil.⁸⁴ Indeed, Alfred Russel Wallace compared the German *bauer* favourably to the nineteenth-century English peasant remnant, claiming that he 'looks on the country as made for him and his fellow-men', whereas the English equivalent is 'wearied by the laws of the large proprietors and becomes in consequence, spiritless and purposeless'.⁸⁵ Conscious of the danger of essentialising the European peasant experience, Collings with judicious selectivity, borrowed ideas from all over the continent. For instance, the butter retail process in Denmark was very much along the line of the plan Collings formulated for Britain.⁸⁶ Co-operatives would sell their milk and cream on to dairies, with each farmer credited for amounts sent. Peasant proprietorship could also promote greater recognition of female labour and Collings's conception of a less gender-specific division of labour came from France. In a wartime letter to *The Times* regarding food supplies and the level of maintenance provided by female workers, Collings stated

*I was asked by some of the farmers whether I would like to see such a sight in England. My reply was that I should be delighted to see it if the conditions were equal.*⁸⁷

Most critically, and again the inspiration was Danish, was legislation that eliminated any future concentration of ownership. In Denmark the consolidation of holdings was forbidden by law as was the sub-division of holdings below twenty-five acres, which

had been another route into landlordism. Collings incorporated this into his programme of land reform laid out in 1906, thus disabling any future aggregation of farm property.⁸⁸

Collective practice reworked social relationships modelled upon common land systems. Replicating Medieval patterns of *spatial* organisation upon the common land system was not desired on grounds of probable inefficiency. To land reform critics, technological resistance endemic in small holdings is evident in this promotion of a domestic vision. Other industries had long severed their connections with Medieval systems of cottage production, with most ready to embrace the new century with even greater mechanical and scientific drives. British agriculture, through enclosure and an eye on Prairie methods of production had gradually enacted a similar revision. A.E. Parker concluded the tendency to aggregate was dominant prior to the reformist clamour, pronouncing that 'domestic manufactures have been replaced by vast mills...the same principle applies to agriculture'.⁸⁹ Yet small holdings not only sought to stop a capitalist procession, but to actually rework it if not actually reverse it. Thus, the co-operative system employed to support small holdings would, in theory, lessen British susceptibility to the vagaries of world markets, a salient issue following the removal of 'Protectionist' trade barriers. The formation of co-operatives enabled a degree of price fixing on behalf of individual members as typified by the Danish experience, purging farming of the boom and bust cycle, without reverting to socialism.

¹For comments on the increasing science and technological trend in agriculture see J. MacDonald, 'Twenty Years' Movement in Agriculture' *Blackwoods Magazine* 144 (1888) 864-873.

²Wiener contends that it was not merely locales of agriculture that were diminished by the Southern metaphor, but also sites of industrial progress and innovation creating a sense of provincialism beyond the 'south country'. M.J. Wiener, *Op Cit.* 42. Furthermore, it repeated the conviction that rural communities were overwhelmingly agricultural, though a perusal of occupational pursuits in Kelly's Directory would indicate otherwise.

³For the promotion of the aristocratic tradition the work of Roland Prothero is perhaps the most obvious referencing point. R. Prothero, 'English Land, Law and Labour' *Edinburgh Review* 165 (1887) 1-39. Lord Lansdowne and his agent, Herbert Smith felt the success of agriculture up until the depression had been achieved largely through the capital commitment of the capitalist. 'It is the capitalist who has gradually given to the soil of England its present character and appearance, and to whose outlay the nation is indebted for its great fertility and productiveness'. H.C.K. Petty-Fitzmaurice and H.H. Smith, 'Landed Incomes and Landed Estates' *Quarterly Review* 166 (1888) 210-239. The more egalitarian treatment of agriculture features in the less conservative *Fortnightly Review* which appealed to a wider readership than some of the agricultural journals. A classic revisionist article is C.A. Fyffe, 'The Arguments of a Peer' *Fortnightly Review* 37 (new series) (1885) 557-566.

⁴J. Howard, 'The Farmers and the Tory Party' *Nineteenth-century* 13 (1883) 1016-1036.

⁵D. Lowenthal and H.C. Prince, 'English Landscape Tastes' *Geographical Review* 55 (1965) 186-222.

⁶'Local' in this context is evidently operating at a sub-county level, similar to my earlier discussion on the production of village-based spatial knowledge with reference to the dissemination of signs agrarian depression.

⁷This notion of deceit is explicit in claims that agriculture had been betrayed by all orthodox, non-Ruralist ideologies.

⁸R. Prothero (1887), *Op Cit.*

⁹A earlier attempt at local control over the provision of allotments as opposed to small holdings was through the 1887 Allotments Act which provided labourers who wanted land with small plots of up to one acre by requesting an allocation from their sanitary authority. In terms of conversions by this method, the allotment revolution was a comparatively small affair with a Board of Agriculture report published in July 1890 suggesting that from 1886 (i.e. before the passing of Allotments Act) there had been an increase in the number of allotments by 97,765. In the Second Annual Report of the Rural Labourers' League, the committee stated that this figure had been achieved with the 'remarkable stimulus' given by the passing of the 1887 Act. Jesse Collings had originally intended both allotments and small holdings to be dealt with in a single encompassing body of legislation. This was the basis of his 1886 Allotments and Small Holdings Bill. However, the Government allowed only the allotments part to pass into law, promising Collings in compensation, that a Select Committee would be set up to review land reform involving larger holdings. J. Collings, (1889) Select Committee on Small Holdings. Report, 16; Second Annual Report of the Rural Labourers' League, 6.

¹⁰The basis of the Act lay in an earlier Small Holdings Bill placed before Parliament in 1888 in response to the failure to secure small holding in tandem with allotment legislation in 1887. The idea for compulsory purchase powers to enable the creation of allotments was first mooted in *The Radical Programme*. *The Times* 16 May 1888, col. d, 15.

¹¹The proposed restrictions on compulsory purchase powers for *allotments* in the Small Holdings Bill that Collings introduced before Parliament in 1888 were with regard to churches, chapels, schools, a public building, mines and quarries. *The Times* 16 May 1888, col. d, 15.

¹²Collings stated before the Select Committee on Small Holdings that if the Ecclesiastical Commissioners and Oxford and Cambridge Colleges sold their land, 'it would be very much for the public good'. J. Collings, Select Committee on Small Holdings. Report. (1889) c313, 722-727, 16.

¹³M. O' Brien, Experiments in Peasant Proprietorship *Fortnightly Review* 28 (new series) (1880) 579-591.

¹⁴Collings clarified the law regarding compulsory purchase. 'Section Two of the Allotments Act of 1887 directs that before local authorities shall buy land in any locality, efforts should be made to supply allotments by voluntary arrangement'. *The Times* 30 January 1894, col. b, 12.

¹⁵J. Collings (1906), *Op Cit.* 206.

¹⁶At the time of the Select Committee on Small Holdings the only legislative achievement had been the securing of laws for allotments. The commitment to the small farms would require a significantly higher degree of capital outlay.

¹⁷Morgan repeated the claim, suggesting that the 1892 Act did not ensure 'economical purchase'. S. Morgan, Small Fruit Farms for England *Fortnightly Review* 81 (1907) 325-336.

¹⁸Collings was quoted in *The Times* stressing the importance of the need to stop any further denial of potential small holders on the basis of a failure to pay initial down payments. '...it seems to me to be absolutely necessary that county councils, in cases that seem to them suitable, should be enabled to advance the whole of the purchase money, to be paid in annual instalments'. *The Times* 25 December 1906, col. c, 6 - 'Small Holdings Report'.

¹⁹*The Times* 20 February 1908, col. c, 6 - Jesse Collings and the Small Holdings Act.

²⁰*The Times* 28 May 1907, cols. a & c, 7 - Jesse Collings on Lord Harcourt's Small Holding and Allotments Bill.

²¹S.B.L. Druce, Report from the Select Committee on Small Holdings. Minutes of Evidence. (1889) c313, q7,452, 382. William Gibbons, the Secretary of a local Permanent Allotment Association, a bootmaker and holder of a three acre 'allotment farm' near Wellingborough stated before the Small Holdings Select Committee that there remained a high degree of obstruction to allotment conversion unless blanket land acquisition powers were employed: 'There are a deal of obstacles thrown in the way of the purchase of land, if you do not have compulsory clauses'. W. Gibbons, Report from the Select Committee on Small Holdings. Minutes of Evidence. (1889) c313, q3,579.

²²Q. Bone, Legislation to revive small farming in England 1887-1914 *Agricultural History* 49 (1975) 653-662.

²³Under the terms of the Act, the parish council could purchase land to be let out as allotments not exceeding one acre of arable and three acres of pasture, or four acres of pasture to one person. Nevertheless, the parish councils were not allowed to exercise compulsory powers, though they could apply to County Councils to utilise their right should an agreement for the sale of land fail.

²⁴The Rural Labourers' League stated in its Seventh Annual Report that the 'double procedure' had 'entailed much loss of time, with consequent irritation on the part of the men'. Rural Labourers' League (1896) Seventh Annual Report.

²⁵Within these thousand visits, the League felt that their work had met with considerable approval. 'The labourers have invariably shown a deep interest in the objects of the League, and a hearty appreciation of the advice and practical assistance which the Committee [the national organising committee] and agents have been able to give. Rural Labourers' League (1892) Third Annual Report 7.

²⁶Despite believing all people possessed rights to the land, Collings did not subscribe to the Socialist vision of the State nationalising the land, not least because he saw this as the replacement of one landlord by another. The crux of speech he gave to constituents in December 1898 was that the most appropriate plan of rural reform would allow for the *individual* to improve their position. *Rural World* Vol. IX no. 552, 17 December, 994. Collings was keen to ensure that no material injury would be suffered by any land owner as a result of the small holding plan. J. Collings(1914), *Op Cit.* xxxii.

²⁷George Brodrick (1882) was particularly disappointed by the Richmond Commission claiming it offered no decisive and authoritative verdict on the issues of tenure and occupation of land. G.C. Brodrick, State and Prospects of British Agriculture in 1882 *Fortnightly Review* 32 (1882) 608-624. The need for action regarding the sale of adulterated products was based on the belief that the profit margins of the butter-making industry had been undermined by adulteration. If this practice was stopped, it was estimated that double the number of cows could be kept in England. As small holdings would specialise in small-scale foodstuffs such as butter, the setting up of a Food Products Adulteration Committee in relation to agricultural products would have obvious implications for determining their success. Royal Commission of Agricultural Depression (1897) Final Report par. 558 and par 608 - Summary of Recommendations. c8540.

²⁸Walter Bear deplored the ignorance of the need for land reform. 'The country has been ringing with the cry of agricultural depression, and the effects of calamity have been too generally felt by all classes of the nation...The only way to attract capital to farming is to render it secure from appropriation by any but those who use it'. W.E. Bear (1882), *Op Cit.*

²⁹In the First Annual Report of the Rural Labourers' League the connection between depression, out-migration and the 'grave social ills of an influx to the city is stressed. The report states 'The improvement of the condition of the rural labourers, and the holding out to them of a prospect of an open career upon the land, are the natural means of checking their rapid migration into large towns'. Rural Labourers' League (1889) First Annual Report, 7. Lord Wantage, the renowned reformist landowner, stated "'Lower your rent" is the first remedy that occurs to the public, and lower it again is the second idea that presents itself'. Wantage stresses that a continual reduction of rent only affects the tenant in the long term because the landlord can no longer afford farm improvements such as enhanced drainage. 'The ultimate result' Wantage concludes, '[is an] impoverished condition of the farms and an

increased inability on the part of tenants to pay even the reduced rental'. Lord Wantage, *Small Farms Fortnightly Review* 41 (1887)225-236.

³⁰S. Williamson, Agricultural and Commercial Depression *Fortnightly Review* 37 (1885) 70-83. Lord Wantage claimed that the great attention to detail afforded by spade cultivation enabled small holdings to increase production per acre. Collings supported this argument, stating that small holdings offered 'extreme attention as to labour and personal care'. J. Collings (1888) Select Committee on Small Holdings. Report. 65.

³¹W. Gibbons, (1889) Select Committee on Small Holdings. Minutes of Evidence. q3567, 193..

³²J.D. Godwin, *Small Holdings and Cottage Gardens* (London 1915) 39.

³³It was highly probable that Collings's conception of failure was shaped by the material and mental despair of the rural labourers, particular through his work with the National Agricultural Labourers' Union, the Allotments Extension Association and the Rural Labourers' League.

³⁴W.I. Wilkes, Jesse Collings and the 'back to the land' movement (Unpubl. M.A. Thesis. University of Birmingham) 24. D.A. Hamer, *Op Cit*.

³⁵The essays that made up *The Radical Programme* were first printed in *Fortnightly Review* during 1883 and 1884. T.H.S. Escott, then editor of the *Fortnightly Review* and a loyal supporter of Chamberlain, contributed more than half the essays for the final volume. J. Collings, *The Radical Programme* (No.4): the agricultural labourer *Fortnightly Review* 34 (new series) (1883) 609-625; J. Chamberlain (1885) *Op Cit*.

³⁶J.L. Green, *Rural World* Vol. II 18 July 1890, 1013.

³⁷J. Collings (1906), x..

³⁸Collings was insistent the future prosperity of the nation lay in the soil and not the urban manufacturing industries. W.I. Wilkes, *Op Cit*. 35; Fforde suggests Balfour's Government combined an opposition to urban expansion with a neglect of the farming industry. M. Fforde, *Op Cit*.

³⁹F.E. Green (1920), 177.

⁴⁰'When the population of the New World shall have so increased that exports of food produce shall be limited, the Act [1892 Small Holdings Act] will probably be the useful instrument for which it was designed'. T. Stirton(1893), *Op Cit*.

⁴¹*The Times* 6 August 1907, col. a, 8.

⁴²Wantage stated that '...never during the present generation has there been a time so favourable as the present for the purchase of land in small quantities. Lord Wantage (1887), *Op Cit*.

⁴³Major Rasch introduced the question to which Collings acted upon before the House of Commons on 13 April, 1894. In an alarmist speech he claimed 'Houses are being closed for lack of tenants, and land once worth £40 an acre can now be purchased for £5'. *Rural World* Vol. 6 No. 279, 20 April 1894, 275.

⁴⁴*Rural World* Vol.1 No. 1, 22 December 1888, 1.

⁴⁵Holderness observed 'the small family farmer [and] the ability of his kind to survive both the mania for amalgamation and improvement and the new regime of 'low farming' after 1875 was demonstrated repeatedly during the century'. B.A. Holderness, *The Victorian Farmer* in G.E. Mingay (Ed) *The Victorian Countryside* Vol. I (London 1981) 227-245.

⁴⁶Making a direct link between the Middle Ages and 'Merry England', the Hon. Evelyn Cecil claimed that a return to this past state is only possible if 'the bad is pruned away, and only the best - the self-reliance, the sense of responsibility and the kindness - is retained'. E. Cecil, *The Changing Countryside* *Edinburgh Review* 233 (1921) 316-329.

⁴⁷Chamberlain spoke of the need to 'go back to the old system and re-establish the peasants and yeomen who were one of the most prosperous, the most independent and the most comfortable of all classes in the community'. D.A. Hamer, *Op Cit.* xviii. J. Collings (1906), *Op Cit.* 40.

⁴⁸The literature on the establishment of a stable meaning of 'peasant' is vast. Perhaps some of the most interesting research undertaken recently is by Alan Macfarlane, Mick Reed and Dennis Mills. Both Mills and Reed claimed the 'peasantry' was not a rigid and enduring class, but one that transmuted within a specific economic and temporal context. M. Reed (1984), *Op Cit.*; D.R. Mills, *The Peasant Tradition* *Local Historian* 11 (1974) 200-207. Reed suggests that 'household producer' would be a more appropriate definition' reflecting the multifarious nature associated with the 'peasant' occupation. Mills suggests that a more traditional interpretation is of the peasant as a self-employed person, placed beneath the tenant farmer and yeoman, '...unlike the labourer he did not rely entirely on wages, and unlike the higher groups, he did not rely mainly on directing the work of others'. M. Reed (1990), *Op Cit.*; D.R. Mills, *The Nineteenth-century Peasantry of Melbourn, Cambridgeshire* in R.M. Smith (Ed) *Land, Kinship and Lifecycle* (Cambridge 1984). Macfarlane asserts the size of a holding was critical in the formulation of a definition of 'peasantry'. A. Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism* (Oxford 1978) 10.

⁴⁹Alan Macfarlane clarifies the point succinctly, declaring '...feudal copyholders or modern small tenant-farmers could both, in theory be "peasants"'. A. Macfarlane, *Op Cit.*

⁵⁰J. Collings, (1889) Select Committee on Small Holdings. Report with Proceedings and Minutes of Evidence. 6. As Raphael Samuel suggests, the notion of single occupations in the countryside needs to be problematized. Indeed, there is evidence which suggests many agricultural labourers did pursue other lines of employment. R. Samuels, *Village Labour* in R. Samuel (Ed) *Village Life and Labour* (London 1975) 5.

⁵¹J. Collings (1906), *Op Cit.* 103.

⁵²Ibid. 48. Collings contends the degradation of the peasant to hireling class status accelerated around the mid-eighteenth century, finally slowing down in the period immediately prior to the depression. In a sense this lends weight to Reed's thesis that the extent of the peasantry was much greater than portrayed by historians. M. Reed (1984), *Op Cit.*

⁵³'It was by ages of unjust and suicidal legislation that the English peasantry was divorced from the soil and reduced to a hireling caste.' Once again the land reform language speaks of a natural marriage of the Englishman to the soil, and that these bonds had been broken by enclosure. *The Times* 24 August 1906, col. f, 5 - Jesse Collings on 'Rural Education', a letter to the Editor.

⁵⁴J. Collings, (1889) Select Committee on Small Holdings. Report and Minutes of Evidence. 62.

⁵⁵J. Collings (1885), *Op Cit.* 118.

⁵⁶*The Times* 20 October 1906, col. e, 10.

⁵⁷R.E. Prothero, *The Pioneers and Prospects of English Agriculture* *Quarterly Review* 159 (1885) 323-359.

⁵⁸'...the English landscape is also an exemplar of order and neatness. Seemliness and propriety are respected' D. Lowenthal and H.C. Prince, *Op Cit.*

⁵⁹W.J. Keith, *The Land in Victorian Literature* in G.E. Mingay, *The Rural Idyll* (London 1989) 77-91.

⁶⁰Wiener's critique of the shift to urban controlled capitalism, portrayed a troubled reaction perceptible within the growing sense of the historical illegitimacy of the modernising drive and the over-advancement of technological change. 'The idealization of material growth and technical innovation that had been emerging received a check, and was more and more pushed back by the contrary ideals of stability, tranquillity, closeness to the past and 'non-materialism'. M.J. Wiener, *Op Cit.* 5-6.

⁶¹Theodor Shanin states, 'peasants differ between regions and between villages as well as within every village'. T. Shanin, *The Peasant Dream: Russia 1905-7* in R. Samuel and G. Stedman-Jones (Ed) *Culture, Ideology and Politics* (London 1982) 227.

⁶²In Lancashire in 1902, the average farm labourers wage was above 17s a week. In Berkshire the average earning was below 13s 6d. A.L. Bowley, *Rural Population in England and Wales: A Study of the changes of density, occupations and ages* *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 87 (1914) 597-652. Walter Bear reported Essex was one of the lowest paid labour wage counties with average earning around 13s 6d. In contrast, a Northumberland labourer's wage was approximately 17s per week with the cottage rent included, so in effect raising the wage to approximately 20s 9d. W.E. Bear, *The Agricultural Labourer* *Quarterly Review* 178 (1894) 504-530.

⁶³The later campaigns shifted on this view, by advocating the building of affordable, easily maintained properties, which not only symbolised the farmers new-found independence but also attempt to cure the appalling state of rural housing.

⁶⁴A.R. Wallace, *Op Cit.* For Francis Channing, the solution was obvious enough, 'the remedy is ready to our hands. Develop small holdings and stimulate co-operative methods in providing and working them properly'. F.A. Channing, *The Commission on Agriculture* *Fortnightly Review* 62 (1897) 459-463.

⁶⁵Rev. H.C. Ripley, *Report of the Select Committee on Small Holdings. Minutes of Evidence.* (1889) c313, q2,435, 148.

⁶⁶An anonymously authored article from the *Edinburgh Review* of 1919 outlines the attraction for farmers of converting to pasture. 'The farmer could always reduce his labour bill by laying down more land to grass; stock paid well enough and involved small risks compared with the labour and anxieties that attended arable farming'. Anon., *Profit Sharing in Agriculture* *Edinburgh Review* 229 (1919) 1-19.

⁶⁷R.L. Outhwaite, *Peer or Peasant? - The Ruin of Rural England and the Remedy* (London 1909). Morgan supported the argument, declaring that 'permanent pasture will never restore prosperity to the soil'. S. Morgan (1907), *Op Cit.*

⁶⁸P.A. Graham, *The Rural Exodus: The Problem of the Village and the Town* (London 1892).

⁶⁹*Ibid.* 118.

⁷⁰*Ibid.* 145.

⁷¹G. G. Ramsay provided one of the most critical attacks on an education system that had allowed farming to become uncompetitive and conservative in its outlook. A lack on technical education meant the farmer was prone to experiment in ignorance rather than make informed decisions and interpretations based upon the results of trying new methods. G.G. Ramsay, *Technical Education* *Blackwoods Magazine* 143 (1888) 425-443.

⁷²Further to his comments on Germany, Aikman also felt that the Danish education system, where 'admirable provision is made...for technical training in dairying' offered a useful model for the British to copy. C.M. Aikman, *Agricultural Education* *Blackwoods Magazine* 148 (1890) 195-207.

⁷³James MacDonald predicted that farmers would have to receive greater technical instruction. 'The successful farmer of the future must be well grounded in the general and technical knowledge of his business'. J. MacDonald, *Op Cit.*

⁷⁴A.M. Brown, *Among Cottage People: a rural retrospect* *Blackwoods Magazine* 150 (1891) 842-849.

⁷⁵Brown was concerned that the rural child received an education that 'form[ed] his mind and character' towards serving the national interest, particularly in a time of war when many would have to work the soil as part of the war effort. *Ibid.*

⁷⁶Thomas Innes had voiced concern regarding the cost-effectiveness of a nation-wide series of school farms. The problem was, however, spatial as well as economic. Should the school farm be implemented at a district level, geographical distance and the expense of travelling would deny the availability of an education for young agriculturalists. T. Innes, What is Technical Instruction in Agriculture? *Blackwoods Magazine* 143 (1888) 777-783.

⁷⁷J. Collings (1906), *Op Cit.* 21. Collings repeatedly introduced education legislation from 1888 onwards, always to no avail. J.L. Green, *Op Cit.* 206. There appears to have been an intense political indifference to his scheme, as illustrated in the Duke of Devonshires speech to the Rural Labourers' League and reported in *The Times* that Collings was not getting the assistance he needed from the Education department. *The Times* 29 June 1893 col. f, 3.

⁷⁸W.I. Wilkes, *Op Cit.* 101. Collings was acutely aware of the diffident nature and retarded state of British agriculture, which did not reflect the nations pioneering character within the world economy. 'Nearly all other nations in Europe' he declares, 'some by revolution, others by wise statesmanship, have adopted "cultivating ownership" as the basis of their land tenure'. J. Collings (1906) *Op Cit.* 5.

⁷⁹J. Rockwell, The Danish Peasant Village *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1.4 (1974) 409-462. The communal village until the turn of the century was the 'normal type of community'.

⁸⁰In Denmark, the *fæste* was a dependent tenant roughly equivalent to the English estate tenant. P.O. Christiansen, Culture and Contrasts in a Northern European Village: Lifestyles Among Manorial Peasants in Eighteenth Century Denmark *Journal of Social History* 29 (1995) 275-295.

⁸¹In France the overall ownership of a peasant holding was not as significant as Denmark, though 72% still tilled their own land at the time of the survey for the Select Committee on Small Holdings. Report from H.M. Representatives Abroad on the Position of Peasant Proprietors in the Countries in Which They Reside. (1891) Inclosure No. 4 France. 47.

⁸²In an article on the French peasantry by Professor Long for the Rural Labourers' League, he describes the small holders existence as tough but one that proves psychical balance through hard work. *Rural World* (1896) Vol. VIII no. 415, 828.

⁸³W.I. Wilkes, *Op Cit.* 34.

⁸⁴J. Collings (1906), *Op Cit.* 265.

⁸⁵A.R. Wallace, *Op Cit.*

⁸⁶Select Committee on Small Holdings. Minutes of Evidence (1889) c313, 80.

⁸⁷*The Times* 8 October 1915 col. e, 7.

⁸⁸J. Collings (1906), *Op Cit.* 231.

⁸⁹Parker was a pro-landlord figure, supportive of moves to enlarge farms rather than divide them to enhance competitive powers. A.E. Parker, Agricultural Depression *Edinburgh Review* 151 (1880) 1-39.

Chapter 9: Ennobling Space - Places of Englishness

9.1 Ennobling Space

Despite a failure to stabilise a single, discrete, representation of English space, 'back to the land' schemes of all persuasions were theoretically united in constructing what could be termed *ennobling space*. Subscribing to the conviction that rural England possessed latent regenerative powers, the placing of people on the soil re-engaged the individual with a morally and spiritually fulfilled life. Residence within this working space nurtured the perceive life-blood of the English race. Evidently, for those who proposed purchase rather than state control, ownership was the key to unlock this resource, particularly as bonded labour rejected the benefits of individual productivity and consumption. Ownership for Collings evinced the highest possibilities of the Englishman or woman.¹

*A small holder will get up at five o' clock in the morning, not as labour, but as relaxation and pleasure, in order to work on his small holding, while he would think it very hard to go and work in that way for a farmer at 10s or 12s a week.*²

Within *agrarian* concerns for stability, rural England was ideologically appropriated as a place where wider social and political 'questions' could be resolved. For agricultural commentators such as Lord Ernle and William E. Bear through to urban based, but rural-oriented movements such as the Rural Labourers' League, economic and social solutions for a future post-capitalist agrarian age could be translated into rural virtues or moral pre-eminence.³ New economic strategies such as small foodstuff production on owner-occupied plots, could merge with notions of spiritual elevation and a sense of personal self-fulfilment through the dignity of individual labour. Too frequently however, the geography of this idealised realm within which the past was mythologized and an egalitarian future constructed, has been ignored beyond literary criticism of figures such as Richard Jefferies, George 'Sturt' Bourne and Edward Thomas.⁴ Yet an imaginative mapping of this proposed English agrarian topography provides valuable insights not only into a discourse of inward-looking agricultural patriotism, but also for one constituent of this debate in particular, the cultural need for a reversion to former methods. The need to territorialize a distinctive English space prompted the rise of the 'Little England' campaign, a movement which in contrast to modern associations of the idiom was typified by liberals and anti-imperialists disenchanted by a bloated and alienating empire.⁵ Ignoring imperial claims within a territorialization of Englishness, evidently for land reformers it was not urban nodes that retained the clearest expressions of English nationhood, but the spaces in between, the interstices, the canvas the nation was mapped onto. Tapping into a pervasive sense of 'emptiness' induced through agricultural depression,

Collings and others sought to literally *re-fill* these spaces by returning people to metaphorically their *own* soil to experience cherished qualities of toil, patience and endurance.

Though the growing sense of a rural void became commonplace following the depression and outmigration, Collings and the Rural Labourers' League were not strictly advocates of a mass return of urban dwellers to their rural roots in the manner that more Socialistic envisionments favoured through land nationalisation programmes, or the arts and crafts retreats. The objections were twofold, based upon a concern for the diminished purity of the race through in-migration of weaker urban individuals. The principle condemnation of urban-fed land colonies, as typified by the Salvation Army settlement in Essex was that urban inexperience of rural conditions would further increase the number of bankruptcies.⁶ Haggard queried in his study of the rural work of the Salvation Army at Hadleigh, Essex whether the urban-bred could extract the same returns as a rural-born small holder, regardless of any moral or spiritual benefits.⁷ Secondly, 'townsfolk' who inundated the Rural Labourers' League and the *Rural World* with letters asking for advice on setting up small holdings, were implored to gain a greater understanding of 'the intricacies of rural life and the complexities of the soil', and this could best be achieved by 'undergoing two or three years as a paid hand'.⁸ A genuine fear persisted that disaffected townsmen or women responding to the reformist cry merely sought the frivolities of rural life, the shooting, fishing, a 'stroll through the fields with his dog by his side'.⁹ Thus 'back to the land' becomes less a physical relocation and more a statement offering an alternative future for those already working in a modern form of bonded labour - a return of their natural inheritance, the land, back to them. If the longing for a peasant livelihood was equally an urban middle-class celebration as an agricultural solution, then by placing urban refugees on the land another tension is invented between rationalised attempts to re-organise space and a nostalgic over-indulgence.¹⁰ Raymond Williams has most obviously noted this phenomenon believing 'there is almost an inverse proportion...between the importance of the working rural economy and the cultural importance of rural ideas'.¹¹

Critically at this point, a metaphor of 'emptiness' serves a number of purposes. It portrays a sense of the recent desertion from the plough, reflecting a symbolic vacuum in which rural icons of tradition, community and morality are enveloped by modernity, urbanism and degeneration and where idealised visions of a simplistic peasant existence in an English Utopia fail to correspond with harsh material realities. A theoretical connection is made with Martin Wiener's description of an 'empty' rural landscape, 'available for use as an integrating cultural symbol', its cultural vacuity serviceable for all who lay claim with their visions of late nineteenth-century

England.¹² Benedict Anderson refers to the same contestation between objective modernity and abstract antiquity as an 'emptiness of nationalist thinkers', reflective of the absence of a forceful English nationalist tradition which saw the most potent patriotic symbol, the countryside, being pulled in opposite directions, despite similar aims of a rustic revival.¹³ Indeed, Wiener uses this indistinction in aims to also place the agrarian land reform drive within the realm of symbol and myth, thereby condemning it to the reactionary fringe, even asserting that the movement had little agrarian grass roots support in comparison with the interest from the new professional classes.¹⁴ Though it is doubtful that the small holding programme did have the total support of farm labourers, particularly in northern England where freehold property was more prevalent, it is dangerous to fall into the 'fantasy for faddists' trap. Small holdings, for their rural advocates at least, offered a further vision of nationhood by recognising many different experiences of Englishness: working the soil was one, albeit critical, experience, and that peasant proprietorship was closer to the tradition of English individualism than the 'bond' relationship of landlord and tenant. Such thinking subscribes to the assertion that the countryside was beyond simple political and philosophical dualisms such as Left or Right and progress or reaction.

The simple imposition of people into a rural milieu could not guarantee physical or psychical benefits *per se*. Individuals had to understand the ancient techniques and traditions of farming to be remunerated by the fruits of their own labour and experience the glory of a peasant existence, thus prompting resistance to the inappropriateness of urban resettlement. Inherent in claims for the dissipation of property ownership was a liberty of expression. Though farming was and still is an occupation and necessity for survival, it was also the mediation of an individual imagination with the soil transformed into a canvass.

9.2 Rustic Places and Spaces of the Anti-Modern

As the countryside emerged as a repository for all things ancient and enduring, the wider 'back to the land' urge became symbolic of the cultural need to submerge the soul in rustic exuberance.¹⁵ But this rather uncomplicated assessment disregards a number of more subtle nuances, particularly in regard to agricultural land reform. Firstly, it rejects the notion that the movement could be modernist and not simply retroactive. Secondly, and this is an argument situated within more specifically agrarian literature, the rejection of the histories of physiocratic reformers, the technical innovators of probably the most innovative period in English farming, in favour of the medieval peasant existence was interpreted, incorrectly, as being shamelessly atavistic and ill-judged. However, the peasant-revivalist histories provoked an alternative pro-landowning literary campaign led by Roland Prothero.

Both movements legitimated the theoretical importance of small holdings as a potential solution, one in support, the other questioning the economic validity. By appealing to literature which could be placed categorically as either representative of Garden or Machine philosophies, a reappraisal will be attempted which suggests that agrarian small holdings at least, and not the sentimental aesthetic 'back to the land' conviction, offered an alternative modernist narrative, based upon resistance to the relentless global expansion of capital rather than the urban-industrial experience. As the housing plan associated with land reform illustrated, small holdings could prove too progressive. Therefore, the change that the small holding movement cultivated anti-modern spaces should be rejected. The consideration of anti-reform literature will also be considered comprehend Victorian interpretations of how modern the small holdings could be. Furthermore, such literature also reveals how for some anti-reform critics, a potential danger lay in re-creating past conditions based upon inaccurate histories.

9.2.1 The Practice

Each nation pursues its own path to modernity.¹⁶ However, reactions to the experience of mechanisation often supported a similar trait, namely a reassertion of peasant proprietorship within romantic-nationalist critiques of the failings of industrialisation. For Colin Williams and Anthony Smith, the peasant existence becomes an artefact bound up in a nationalist assertion of the 'real', a celebration of 'original' folk culture in an attempt to seek historical legitimacy.¹⁷ The agricultural longing for a return to peasant economies represented a similar conceptual process, progression through an appeal to the past. For some critics less engaged in agriculture, allotments and small holdings offered the preservation of a timeless abstraction in the *fin de siècle* age. For those more concerned with the fortunes of farming, but aware of the wider patriotic need for the preservation of the industry, the movement offered late-nineteenth-century solutions *inspired*, not controlled by historic past methods. Indeed, the answers land reform provided were not part of some esoteric counter-culture but very real political questions.¹⁸ As one anonymous author in *The Nation* expressed, the modernization of farming was ultimately based not upon the technological overhaul of agriculture, but its reorganisation.

*England, which had played so large a part in the experiments and the introduction of new ideas in the eighteenth century, now lagged hopelessly behind, while the continental nations were making the organisation of agriculture into a living art.*¹⁹

In effect the author admitted that British agriculture could never achieve the former dominant position on a global scale. In the eighteenth-century Britain pioneered the

invention of new technologies. By the early twentieth century a number of countries such as the United States and Germany could also apply modern science. The logical conclusion, therefore, was that it would be self-defeating to strive for competitive advantage in a modern world where such a position was theoretically unobtainable. Furthermore, modern scientific applications were distant from an exclusively English experience, thus invoking a fear of a suppression of the vernacular landscape through the universal cultivation of machinery such as the steam plough.

It was commonplace to suggest that peasant revivalism would place a check on technical innovation, but this negates one critical social factor, that technology would ensure even more people joined the exodus from the land into cities or to various countries in the Empire.²⁰ Nevertheless, as evidence collated in this section has demonstrated, Collings and like-minded reformers were not backward looking pastoralists, rather they placed greater emphasis on *organisation* over technology. In a sense they displayed similarities with later German reactionary modernists as identified Jeffrey Herf, with their recognition of the ultimate failure of ideologies that refused to accept technological driven change, particularly on issues of national security.²¹ Innovations could still be employed on the soil, especially within co-operative methods along the lines of the Danish system.

For A.G. Gardiner, in his introduction to Masterman's *To Colonise England*, the old patriarchal system of farming and its eventual failure was testimony to its lack of science. Co-operatives on the other hand, offered a clearer route to scientific agriculture. Inspired by the success of governmental investment and co-operative principles upon the continent, Gardiner was convinced that small holding communities could offer a 'system of collective effort based on the application of science and modern invention to the industry of agriculture'.²² Another anonymous author in *The Nation* urged for greater involvement by the state within a small holding system to collect, digest and distribute farming knowledge rather than depend on the 'periodic displays of a Bakewell or Coke of Norfolk'. With the setting up of a Development Commission prior to World War I, scientific knowledge could be secured and farming transformed into a thoroughly modern industry many thought unobtainable. A shift in emphasis occurred from landlordist sponsored innovation to state-funded invention.²³

If this injection of science and technology was an anathema to some tastes, then so was the functionalism of small holdings and its aesthetic principles based upon utility and the removal of idle space through intensive cultivation of the soil. Sentimentalists such as P.H. Ditchfield abhorred the work of reformers for their role in the removal of that great picturesque symbol, the tumbledown cottage. 'Agitators', he bemoans, 'are eager to pull down our old cottages and erect new ones which lack

all the grace and charm of our old-fashioned dwellings'.²⁴ Reformists alternatively identified the English rural landscape as an (agri)cultural construction crafted over millennia. Their future rural environment was a working vision, not one based on spectacle.

9.2.2 The Literature

Indicative of the directional crisis in farming, a plethora of texts were produced which conveyed a new historiography of agrarian ideas, supporting intentionally or otherwise, the land reform cause.²⁵ As the prevailing agricultural system was financially challenged, old and new ideas were critiqued, theorised, contrasted, contested, manipulated, exploited and sometimes enacted. Frequently, this production of agricultural historical knowledge conflicted with contemporary farming literature in its effusive exposition of the peasant cultivation tradition. Alternative readings as typified by the essays in the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* dispensed with historical precedents, seeking solutions through the increased application of science. Some revivalist histories, like the small holding movement to which they tacitly supported remained silent on scientific reforms through time reflecting a blurring of distinctions between academic texts such as the work of Thorold Rogers and the land reformist polemic, preferring instead to focus on the decline of peasant classes and the contribution of enclosure towards a decimated English rural population, what C.J. Dewey has termed the subversive interpretation of history.²⁶ This resonated with what an anonymous writer to *The Nation* of 1913 described as 'a general contempt for scientific principles' within the farming community.²⁷ Many works engaged in contemporary debates on the redistribution of ownership, by bringing their histories up to the modern period, with a clear division between supporters of patrician-led agriculture and those who interpreted the middle ages as an earlier precedent of an egalitarian agricultural geography.²⁸ This process reflected the contemplative nature of farming, a process which James MacDonald recognized when he alleged 'it is only when we compare the present with the past that we awake to a consciousness of what we have been going through'.²⁹ Kebbel noted how peasant revivalism echoed similar debates aroused at the end of the eighteenth century, though the earlier debate focused on future levels of food supply.³⁰

Perhaps the clearest expression of pro-peasant ideology encompassed within academic histories appears in the economic treatise of Thorold Rogers.³¹ Rogers's seminal *History of Agriculture and Prices* reinforced the contention that the peasant had been rendered destitute by enclosure. In a later work entitled *Six Centuries of Work and Wages* he identified the fifteenth century as the last great period of widespread rural wealth and peasant proprietary, only to be undermined by what he

termed "The Landlordist Conspiracy". His evidence lay in a dramatic decline in the relative value of wages which coincided with the start of the enclosure movement: the land theft eventually erasing of the peasant farmer from the soil. Despite obvious advances in terms of health and enfranchisement, Rogers claimed the labourer at the end of the nineteenth-century was in a significantly worse condition than his fifteenth century equivalent, not least because wage levels remained static or had even declined. 'A multiple of twelve' wrote Rogers, 'will fairly represent, except in house rent (the most formidable item in modern, the most trivial in ancient times), the general difference in the cost of living at the present period and the fifteenth century'.³² Baverstock would later write in response to Rogers that these were 'words which deserved to be carefully weighed'.³³ The accompanying table, (figure 16) 'A Tragedy of English History' illustrates the Rogers contention of diminished financial returns for the peasant. The body of evidence that Rogers presented throughout his academic and political career proved so damning against covetous land appropriation by the landed elite that in 1867 he lost his Drummond chair of Political Economy at Oxford, dismissed in a punitive reaction perhaps encouraged by the landed classes, against his advanced political views.³⁴

Reformist literature placed emphasis on Medieval peasant systems as a forerunner of what could be reconstituted in a late nineteenth-century context. The 'improver' tradition of eighteenth-century England, popular with landlordist writers such as Roland Prothero, was ignored, perhaps because it had been heavily sponsored by the landed aristocracy, immersed within the fad for 'hobby farming'.³⁵ Eric Jones claimed dispersal of 'improvement' knowledge was less by farming textbooks and more by patrician finance and entrepreneurial farmers.³⁶ Spatially, and socially, this support was to hasten the shift away from 'small farms' to 'capital farms' and their attendant system of enclosure.³⁷

Agrarian essays of the pro-peasant reformist nature sometimes engaged in unhelpful though usually implied comparisons between a rejection of technology and a peasant revival. In a classic text by Ford Madox Hueffer entitled *The Heart of the Country*, a clear attempt to emulate the earlier rural writing genre of Richard Jefferies, he berates the intrusion of modernist ideas into rural space as a disruptive influence. Ostensibly Hueffer was no retrogressionist thinker, yet an apprehension pervades his writing towards the social impact of mechanised farming. Technology drove people from the soil through a rejection of labour intensive cultivation. Reservoirs of agricultural tradition and the subtleties of accumulated local knowledge were exhausted by machines such as the steam plough that worked effortlessly on any soil type. Edwin Pratt responded to the modernist challenge by writing '...the merciless town has taken away from the country districts most of [our] handicrafts

A TRAGEDY OF ENGLISH HISTORY.

Wage Condition of the English Labourer in proportion to the Cost of Living for a Family of Five Persons for each Decade from 1260 to 1887.

Diagram constructed from THOROLD ROGER'S "Six Centuries of Work and Wages."

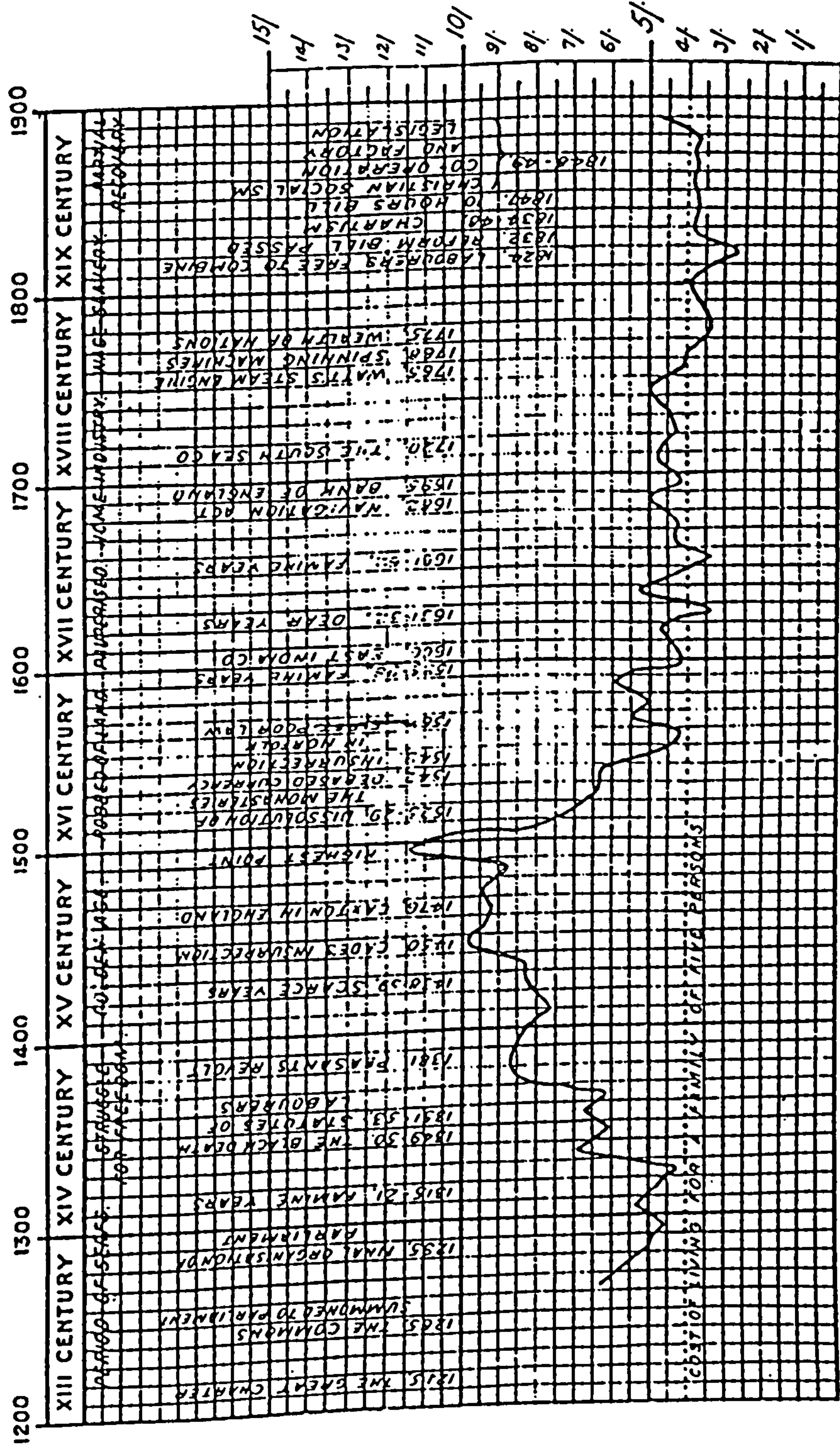


Figure 16: Thorold Rogers' 'Tragedy of English History'

and occupations'.³⁸ Rural England was not a place for the machinist. It is a forlorn Hueffer who published the exhortations of an unnamed 'Advanced Thinker' in disgust.

*...what we need [wrote the 'Advanced Thinker'] is not men with a knowledge of soils, but skilful mechanics. Any soil, light or heavy, can be handled and clean ploughed by the right type of engine.*³⁹

Reacting against such modernising claims, there is a clear sense of violation by alien ideas. New influences forced the rustic to reconceptualise accustomed life-patterns offering liberation from the parish and the plough. Machines did not enforce social control which small holdings with their attempts to preserve village structures quite clearly did. Typically Hueffer asserted loyalty to the land as a moral and patriotic obligation superior to a 'career' for rural dwellers and small holdings offered the achievement of this aim.

*For the ideas of making a career, of putting by against the decline of life, of retiring - these ideas are of a very modern, an artificial growth. I am almost tempted to say that they have sprung up only with the growth of the Anglo-Saxon-Teutonic-industrial-commercialism that is Modernity.*⁴⁰

In the hands of Hueffer, the small holding movement appears resistant to new ideas that appear disruptive to traditional rural life, whatever that may be as it is never actually defined by Hueffer, and uncompromising in its aim to retain village life.

It is this reactionary refusal to accept change without precedent that fuels alternative histories to dismiss the peasant heritage, placing emphasis on the ability of farming to modernise in step with rapid population growth and the dramatic shift in the urban/rural population balance. Mark Overton has recently stated that the enduring myth of the agricultural revolution was a late nineteenth-century invention based upon a reading of history that conformed to the popular fashion for innovation.⁴¹ Central to this support is a tacit acceptance of the role of the patrician classes in providing the financial backing necessary for the development of ideas. Victoria de Bunsen, writing in the 1920s sensed the role of the landowner in the alleviation of depression had most recently been underplayed, ignored by the ferocity of the land reform debate. For her at least there was an acceptance that the landowner could still contribute constructively to the future of farming.⁴² Pursuing this line, perhaps one of the most critical historians of peasant revivalism was W.H.R. Curtler. In two books, *A Short History of English Agriculture* and *The Enclosure and Redistribution of Our Land* Curtler attacked the 'poison of property', not as the phrase suggests in a Socialist struggle for land, but rather because the life of the peasant was a miserable sacrifice with no leisure-time, a problem amplified by the growth of popular urban cultural activities such as sport and the music hall. Convinced that the

'landedness' of the peasant before and after enclosure had been exaggerated for political purposes, Curtler patently did not subscribe to the writing of Thorold Rogers and other peasant revivalists, dismissing the so-called 'golden age of the labourer' (c1400-1540) as a period of general distress.⁴³ With a direct address to Rogers, Curtler suspected any comparison between the nineteenth-century labourer and the Medieval peasant was difficult to determine. In reality the peasant life-style would probably have been 'wretched' anyway.⁴⁴ He contends the period 'hardly made any progress' but does not offer any definition of 'progress', merely volunteering glib statements such as 'the produce of the land was consequently about the same or a little better than in the preceding period'.⁴⁵ To re-inforce his case he selectively draws on exceptionally bad harvests such as the disastrous 1528 crop, destroyed by heavy flooding to make largely unsubstantiated claims such as wheat prices were subject to astonishing fluctuations. As with many economic historians critical of the era of occupational ownership, they neglected to comment that England in the post-enclosure, landlord-led age had suffered a near-catastrophic depression around 1815 and had failed to lift itself from a quarter of a century of stagnation. Specifically, for Curtler, the responsibility for modern farming distress lay firmly with the tenant farmer who had become too dependent on the landlord for financial resources.⁴⁶ Unsurprisingly he remained silent on the role of landowners in contributing to the price collapse of 1879, referring to that year as 'the Black Year'.

Similarly, Roland Prothero offered a resistance to a revival of peasant agriculture, placing emphasis, like Curtler on the real misery underneath the romance of a small holding. 'Small farmers' he explained, 'are the first in the barn in the winter, the first in the fields in the summer, and the last to leave their work. They only rest in the grave'.⁴⁷ Defiant against 'the assailants of property', Prothero feared reformist schemes were ill-conceived, especially those that deprived the owner of his land. 'Crude panaceas are in vogue at the present day' was his vexation, 'wild theories are promulgated for the redistribution of English land'.⁴⁸ Prothero associated the peasant with simple theoretical remedies, his sentimental rediscovery from a forgotten history part of a wider invented tradition.

*The peasant proprietor is the spoilt child of theorists; his artificial creation by the stroke of a pen is the favourite panacea of a large section of land reformers.*⁴⁹

Prothero was a defender of the under-siege landlords of England.⁵⁰ His principle worry, therefore, was with land nationalisation rather than the outright development of small holdings, believing that relief for farming could only be ensured by the injection of more capital, and not the suppression of landlordism. He was convinced that small holdings would aggravate rather than cure depression, declaring that 'to this

theory', of peasant proprietorship, 'reactionary Radicalism is pledged, and experience is diametrically opposed'.⁵¹ Subscribing to the same philosophy of J.B. Lawes that productivity per acre was of relevance in tackling depression, Prothero urged the greater promotion of the truth behind British farming production levels, particularly in comparison with continental levels, where results proved favourable.⁵² Unable to conceive an economic system free from cyclical growth and decline unlike Jesse Collings, Prothero exhibited a clear concern for future farming should the nation convert to peasant ideals, not least because the English peasant would be at a competitive disadvantage from nations with 'genial climates'.

*The heavy rainfall and low temperatures of this country narrowly limit the number of agricultural products which are suited to the farming of peasant proprietors and even confine cereals to a limited area. Under such circumstances it is impossible that peasant proprietors can flourish universally in Britain.*⁵³

Primarily Prothero was concerned with agricultural not social solutions. Contrary to popular demand to divide farm holdings, Prothero promoted the need for greater economies of scale, borrowing the language of industrial modernism to state that 'large farms are the factories in which the staple products of farming can be most economically produced'.⁵⁴

For farming to move into the modern age it had to reject the 'little "dirty boot" man' for 'science and organisation' and the development of the farm as some sort of production line.⁵⁵ But Prothero's attack on the backward inclination of peasant proprietorship as proposed by the agrarian small holding agenda rejected the assertion that intensive cultivation could be 'organised'. Contrary to his assertion, the experience of celebrated examples such as Catshill demonstrated above anything else that small holdings were not a chaotic distribution of land claims, but a new egalitarian geography that carefully apportioned land to those who wished to cultivate independently and for the wider benefit of the nation. Here lay a danger which most authors fell into, of polarising the debate as one between technology versus regressive peasant revivalism rejecting the many nuances present in debate. As stressed throughout this section, simple dichotomies are not appropriate to late nineteenth-century English rural discourses. Methods that ensured a greater distribution of agricultural wealth within internal peasant markets beyond the uncertainty of economic cycles of growth and decay, in co-operative rather than competitive capital offered an alternative and more humane modernising ethos. However, for figures like Collings, this would not correspond with any Socialist theory because the small holding system would be based upon individual purchase. Landownership would be expanded and diversified, not obliterated. The small holding drive provided a

divergent route to progress that did not subscribe to any great futurist ideological construction, either modernist or anti-modern but was situated somewhere beyond these divisions in a domestic and almost timeless vision.

9.3 *The Colonization of England*

9.3.1 Terminating the Rural Exodus

Behind land reform hyperbole lay a conceptual assertion to 'colonize' England, an acute problem that after thirty years of continued agricultural depression concluded in a dialogue of patriotism and agriculture that touched upon the issue of soldier resettlement following World War I. Subscribing to the environmentalist ethic, the restorative power of rural England was celebrated. Rendering rural England an idealized, yet *alien* experience, the expansionist language of Empire and the contrary promotion of English values were blended by reformers to stress the patriotic necessity of an enforced migration of people from town to rural heartland alongside efforts to secure the existing rural population. This signalled a theoretical shift from Collings who had remained ambivalent to urban out-migration onto small farms. Converts to country living were referred to as *settlers* heightening the sense of the English people reduced to foreign status within their own country. In essence, the new-world trail wagon was replaced by the plough within an English context, leading the destitute and dispossessed into a profitable future. To reverse the English rural diaspora, the clearest social manifestation of agricultural depression, the attractiveness of indigenous agriculture over colonial farming required encouragement and endorsing. For financial and logistical reasons small holdings offered a more viable, and critically, an explicitly *English* solution to entice people onto the soils of England.⁵⁶ The waste of human resources rankled Collings and needed to be rectified by some measure of 'back to the land' practice that recognised the potential of the English countryside. 'Instead of shipping overseas cargoes of men and women who form the pith and lustihood of our country' he wrote in *The Times* of 19 October 1909, 'we should, by an effective scheme, place them on the vast areas of untilled land which exist at home', thus repositioning his stance on allowing the urban runt into rural locations.⁵⁷

For reformers intent on providing an English solution little sense of national identity or spiritual restoration lay in scientific modernism. Alternatively for Ruralists including Collings, a settlement to rural decay lay in a programme of reform that recognised vernacular cultural forms and their dependency on a vibrant rural population. The continued export of people overseas worked against this aim. Efficiency drives and the increased mechanisation of agriculture lessened the need for the current rural population size even in its emaciated form. Scientific modernism and

economic *laissez-faire* merely attempted to eradicate depression by formulaic responses to each economic fate within a flawed system rather than adopt a revolutionary new approach such as Collings's eclectic rural modernisation theory. It is ironic, therefore, that adverts, as typified by the example underneath should appear in the *Rural World*, the mouthpiece of Collings's Rural Labourers' League, promoting the advantages of Canadian farming.

Free Grant of 160 Acres
Improved Farms at Reasonable Prices
Fine Climate
No Rent Light Taxes
Free Schools Good Markets
Rapidly Developing Industries
Large Import and Export Trade

Figure 17: Canadian Agricultural Recruitment Advertisement

Source: *Rural World* Vol. XIV no. 658. February 1902, 47.

Extensively-farmed agricultural 'Utopias' typical of the advertisement above, though failing to re-inforce the social bonding of the English village, did promise individual profits free from landlordism, the 'slavery' of bonded labour and restrictive cultivation practices imposed by land agents.⁵⁸ In essence, small holdings made similar claims in direct competition but at a more modest areal extent, and more importantly, for implementation on English soils, confirming the explicit link between small farming and a revival of a sense of Englishness. If agricultural labour represented the most pure expression of English virtue, then it had to be practised within an English spatial context. Here a strict division is imposed between the intentions of 'little England' patriotism and the jingoism of the imperial sentiment. There existed a patriotic duty to ensure the continued working of English soil by Englishmen. This was the ennobling space that Collings sought. Little Englandism, particularly as read by Collings required an end to the continued supply of the best English labour to the colonies, providing an unnecessary competitive advantage to economic if not political rivals. Emigrants were tempted by what Collings termed 'highly coloured promises', which the British subjugated labourer had no hope of realizing at home under the conditions of depression and concentrated landownership. Collings quotes at length from a number of advertisements that adorned newspapers, leaflets and posters.⁵⁹ The following example promoting Canada is interesting for a number of reasons of most intrigue is the claim that empty Canadian spaces were the inheritance of the 'sons' of the English soil. In effect, Canada was billed as an extension to the English heartland,

negating any sense of a patriotic betrayal by emigration. Furthermore, the text of the advert portrays the farm labourer as desirable and respected, encapsulated in the statement 'Canada *wants* men to till the soil', creating a sense of longing and worth, qualities absent in patrician-controlled England and heightened by the perceived inaction of successive governments to attack the depression in a committed fashion.

*Canada - Sons of Britain, Canada is your heritage. Get a piece of the Earth. Two years rent of a British farm will purchase a farm of equal area in Canada. Place yourself and your money there. Canada wants men to till the soil. Whole counties given away. Your chance of home and competence. Homesteads of 160 acres each given free. Farming in Canada means 100 per cent profit. Free farms for all in Canada.*⁶⁰

Anxiety surrounding rural flight was woven into numerous paranoias and fears that subsumed late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century life, most notably, the importance of the rural population for national security, as rehearsed within the Condition of Rural England racial degeneracy discourse. Thus land reform was proclaimed as a defensive necessity alongside the army and navy. Indeed, in Collings's 1916 essay on World War I and the implications for agriculture, he suggests that 'the money spent to carry it [land reform] out should be treated as a war expenditure or war insurance'.⁶¹ If as J.S. Nicholson asserted, there was no more grave an issue than rural depopulation, then this is evident in the timing of a report on Emigration issued by the Board of Agriculture during the period immediately prior to World War I.⁶² The report stated the withdrawal of country residents had rendered the 'supply of [skilled] labour...deficient'. Statistics suggested that in 1912 alone 268,000 people emigrated from Britain, though the number from rural locations was not expressed in this figure.⁶³ Howard Frank in a letter to *The Times* dated 9 June 1913 believed that perhaps 20% of such a figure were rural dwellers. It was his conviction that between 1 April 1911 and 31 March 1913, 58,000 'sons' of the soil left for Canada alone.⁶⁴ Indeed, the threat from Canada was interpreted as very real. Two further reports in *The Times* suggested that the tide of emigration was flowing to Canada whilst ebbing from South Africa, with perhaps one-third of 132,461 British emigrants leaving for Canada in the eight months following April 1913 originating in the country districts.⁶⁵ Obed Smith, Assistant Superintendent of Emigration for Canada admitted to the Dominions Royal Commission of 1912-13 that the Canadian government had been responsible for the removal of English farm labourers though he did justify the Canadian position by suggesting that such workers would have left the land in any case.⁶⁶ Defenders of Canada's emigration policy were quick to point out that English farmers had not been actively targeted because their inappropriate English methods

COUNTY	1891	1901	DECREASE %
Bedfordshire	15, 510	11, 815	23.8
Buckinghamshire	15, 337	12, 244	20.2
Berkshire	19, 735	15, 886	19.5
Oxfordshire	18, 353	14, 925	18.7
Northamptonshire	21, 015	17, 279	17.8
Hertfordshire	18, 611	15, 326	17.7
Essex	40, 352	33, 591	16.8
Sussex	32, 674	27, 437	16.0
Wiltshire	24, 921	20, 982	15.8
Surrey	15, 035	12, 740	15.3
Huntingdonshire	8, 085	6, 862	15.1
Rutland	2, 789	2, 374	14.9
Hampshire	28, 797	24, 530	14.8
Gloucestershire	21, 238	18, 239	14.1
Leicestershire	15, 600	13, 479	13.9
Warwickshire	19, 664	17, 003	13.5
Middlesex	6, 508	5, 644	13.3
Suffolk	41, 137	35, 997	12.5
Cambridgeshire	26, 506	23, 248	12.3
Norfolk	48, 872	43, 151	11.7
Kent	44, 107	38, 997	11.6
Worcestershire	15, 870	14, 039	11.5
Durham	11, 712	10, 373	11.4
Somerset	32, 810	29, 230	10.9
Dorset	17, 218	15, 427	10.4
Devonshire	39, 234	35, 408	9.8
Nottingham	17, 933	16, 174	9.8
Denbighshire	8, 680	7, 861	9.4
Lincolnshire	56, 185	51, 625	8.1
Derbyshire	13, 640	12, 590	7.7
Merionethshire	6, 445	5, 962	7.5
Cornwall	23,793	22, 008	7.5
Lancashire	43, 228	40, 124	7.2
Westmoreland	6, 295	5, 847	7.1

Table 10: Number of Males Engaged in Agriculture in England and Wales Showing Counties with the Heaviest Percentage Decreases†

Source: J. Collings, *Land Reform: Occupying Ownership, Peasant Proprietary and Rural Education* (1906).

†There are some important anomalies with this table which must be highlighted. Firstly, that female labour is not included, thus disregarding a substantial body of the rural workforce from consideration. Mingay suggests that the number of females employed directly in agriculture fell by 46,000 or 79%. G.E. Mingay, *A Social History of the English Countryside* (London 1990). Secondly, at no place in the accompanying text does Collings state what criteria were employed to determine an agricultural occupation. Finally, the geography of southern failure is supported by these statistics which show a number of Home Counties, such as Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire suffering the highest out-migration rates.

were too ingrained for successful utilisation within the new extensive techniques employed in Canada.⁶⁷ The overall conclusion was, however, that rural emigration was proceeding too fast with attendant manpower risks. To further re-inforce the point, Britain's greatest continental rival, Germany, had succeeded in stemming the flow of out-migration. In 1907 only five people per ten thousand left Germany compared to fifty-three in Britain. For the supporters of a peasant revival, this was conclusive evidence of the success of *bauern* agriculture. To further support such claims, a Board of Agriculture Report concluded the only contrary influence to a further population decline lay in an increase of intensive small holding cultivation.

Explanations for unparalleled rural out-migration were varied, though inevitably agrarian depression and the role in the financial downturn played by restricted land ownership were suggested as initial causal factors. The voracious activities of over forty emigration societies and the 'boom' tactics of colonial governments were also denounced. The Board of Agriculture Report on Migration from Rural Districts in England and Wales plainly asserted 'this accelerated emigration is attributed to several causes, the most generally mentioned being the activity of emigration agents in advertising the allurements of colonial life'.⁶⁸ The work of the emigration agencies was further facilitated by the collapsing of perceived spatial distances. Thus the agricultural correspondent to *The Times* could write 'Canada to-day seems as near to the young countryman as London did to his father'.⁶⁹ Evidently, the attraction of city life was not the sole migration determinant as 'men fly from the English countryside to the most silent and isolated wilds in the west of Canada'.⁷⁰ For a contributor to *The Nation* of Saturday, 27 December 1913, the origins of the exodus lay not in the fact that agricultural labour *per se* was uncongenial, rather that little prospect of an agrarian recovery had encouraged workers to seek employment elsewhere.

Collings's obsession with the issue is easy enough to detect in the title alone of his seminal 1914 text *The Colonization of Britain: A complete scheme for the regeneration of British rural life*, his final 'major' work on the wider need for small holdings. A primary motive for the publication of Collings's colonisation ideas were to discredit Salvation Army emigration schemes that were claimed to encourage the strong, sound, healthy and industrious to migrate.⁷¹ Emigration overseas was for Collings, even more detrimental to the fate of the nation than a townward shift. 'A man who leaves our shores', he noted 'as a rule, does not return, and his going is an irremediable loss to the country'.⁷² Naturally enough the usual portends of spiritual bankruptcy and the loss of the national backbone were conjured up, but Collings could also support his arguments with sound economic evidence. Emigration spelled material loss. An article in *Truth* of April 1911 suggested that each farmer who left

Britain took around £20 per head. Much of this money could have been beneficially invested in English farmland instead. The Collings position on this careless capital leakage was clear.

*...the millions of money carried away by the emigrants might have been used in producing some at least of the vast quantities of the smaller articles of food now imported from abroad.*⁷³

The British state paid to have people educated only for the 'real wealth' of the country, the sound, healthy and strong farm worker, to be exported to rival agricultural competitors. Collings's principle objection to the 'emigration peril' as he phrased it was the apparent capitulation to commercialism, provoking a lamentation that agriculture was 'regarded practically as of no account'.⁷⁴

The emigration problem was exacerbated by sensing the future of the Empire was no longer assured, prompting an increased urgency to repopulate the sacred heart of England.⁷⁵ Collings was one among many who likened Britain to the last years of the Roman Empire purely because the Mother Country had forsaken agriculture for commercialism. Clearly a fear existed of imperial overstretch and collapse leaving Britain resembling a hollow shell, borrowing the image of English villages as nodal elevations of morality mapped into the English landscape at a time when the 'centre and heart should be strong and vigorous'.⁷⁶ Though the political outlook of Roland Prothero with regard to agriculture differed from Collings, even he could not fail to agree 'the places of the agricultural labourers who have responded splendidly to the call of patriotism must be filled or cultivation will cease'.⁷⁷ Through continued neglect rural England had become 'empty' and like the distant corners of Empire, it too had become a space to be colonized. Urban ignorance had propagated the myth of a surplus British population. Collings and others who subscribed to similar reformist theories contested such claims, suggesting instead the land was 'crying out' for people. Indeed, for him, rural England appeared more sparsely populated than any other country in Europe.⁷⁸

9.3.2 Racial Stability and the Need to Colonize Rural England

Colonial emigration not only undermined a future return to a profitable cultivation of the land but also threatened to destabilize the English racial lineage. The central premise to such fears lay in a process of selection by colonial emigration offices that led to the removal of the fittest and most able of labourers and farmers to overseas colonies.⁷⁹ To realize the small holding vision, these were the very people required on English soil. At stake was a continuation of the English rural race in its noblest form. The diminution of numbers working the English soil would eventually produce an 'effeminate and demoralised' race.⁸⁰ Again, in such sentiments it must be observed

that Englishness was essentially a masculine component. However, Collings at his most prophetic in 1885 realised that pre-eminently, farming instilled restraint, and the production of such a withered race could only lead to war and other ensuing disasters. Such pessimistic rhetoric for Ruralists and reformers alike proved to be thirty years ahead of time.⁸¹ In a Parliamentary debate during August 1910, Collings emphasised the connection between labour, land and regeneration by employing 'blood and soil' imagery.⁸² In the previous year Collings similarly over-stated his case by comparing the potential of back to the land philosophies with combatants in Classical mythology who when fallen gained 'renewed life and vigour by each contact with Mother Earth'.⁸³

Drawing upon the same racial theories that informed Condition of Rural England discourses, the reduction of the farming population of all classes was a cause for concern, of equal importance was the irrevocable lowering of labour quality, a direct consequence of colonial governmental recruitment effectiveness. The soundest individuals of 'good moral character with money in their pockets', of which it was estimated that no more than one-quarter of the British population, rural and urban, could be categorized as such, were tempted by the freedom to express their innate husbandry talents within a more socially and economically (if not necessarily physically) conducive environment. The obverse component to the 'emigration peril' was that 'the poor, the weak, the idle, the criminal, the defective of mind and body are left behind to propagate their kind'.⁸⁴ Further loss could seriously have jeopardised the small holding programme. The reformist movement acted upon the fatalistic outcomes of the Condition of Rural England discourse, by manipulating the agrarian solution into an approach that concurred with the racial scientific rationale of the time. Any pessimism over potential damage to the reformist scheme of continued out-migration was controlled by an optimism invested in the powers of racial recovery through intensive farming. However, the need for an experienced and well-motivated rural population still existed. The disordered planting of townfolk upon English soil was liable to failure. Therefore, for Collings the maintenance of a racial ideal was most attainable through the security of a sizeable rural population untempted by overseas profits. Only then could a gradual return of townfolk to the soil take place. Collings suggested that his land reform proposals would ensure all rural labourers and others connected with agriculture need never emigrate. The small holding programme could settle one million families on English soil to be engaged in 'productive employment, competing with no one but the foreigner' rather than ship them off to colonial locations.⁸⁵ His imperialist credentials were never in doubt, particularly being a close colleague of Joseph Chamberlain. It was his wish to see a strong Empire, but if there was a need for Anglo-Saxon stock overseas, then it had to come

from the cities of England, accepting the rural population as an invaluable commodity for national strength, an asset to be cherished and nurtured and not relinquished readily. 'Such increased rural population' Collings believed 'would be an effective and healthy balance wheel to regulate the action of the social machine'.⁸⁶ As Collings attested, 'these emigrants are all of such a class as no nation can spare that is regardful of its safety and prosperity'.⁸⁷

Even though land was one of the indispensable elements to human life and happiness, it had to be intensively worked to secure the greatest benefits. Within this spiritual and material dialogue a land reformist aesthetic emerged based upon utility. Utility as an aesthetic principle gained common acceptance amongst land reformist theories that asserted the bucolic landscape as an essentially (agri)cultural construction, the result of centuries of prudential crafting. For Collings this rejection of ornamentation and the Picturesque for functionalism had foundations in a total belief in the occupation of the soil for basic human happiness. There is a sense that existence beyond the tilling of the land was ultimately frivolous when he states with fundamental zeal that 'the land is Nature's great factory in which the work never ceases by night or day, producing everything we eat, use, wear or handle'.⁸⁸ But this elementary reading must be embellished by a rejection of the austerity of extensive cultivation in favour of the immediacy of the peasant system with a consequent awakening of the glories of nature within the individual that moved critics as diverse as William Morris and Rider Haggard.⁸⁹ Therefore though Collings can revel in the beauty of the English vernacular landscape, his ideal is ultimately futurist and obtainable, being based upon a stringent reworking of the countryside inspired by a vision of the past. Ennobled space becomes less a physical entity and more a confluence of agrarian spiritualism and endeavour. Idle spaces represented by tumbledown were theorized into a conceptual intersection between the failure of modern agrarian capitalism and a dulling of national spirit providing the cultural exigency that prompted the need for an alternative 'way of seeing' that peasant modernism could offer.⁹⁰ Repeatedly, Collings referred to the English countryside as increasingly resembling a desert, its barrenness profoundly un-English when the extension of 'south country' imagery is conformed too. Small holdings were, in many senses, the logical conclusion of taking the English love for consolidating the past and the need to innovate to extremes: a place where ultimately conflicting ideologies could be reconciled. Thus peasant cultivation, it was claimed could regress the individual back to his or her purest Anglo-Saxon form whilst also providing the necessary physical regeneration. But such a vision would be lost forever by a continual draining of the national lifeblood.

9.3.3 The Proper Spaces of England: Patriotism, Jingoism and 'Little England'

A persistent theme throughout this section has been the appropriation of patriotic rhetoric by promoters of small farming to stress the extended importance of rural living to an essentially ambivalent urban population. Within the work of Jesse Collings this has been most manifest in the expounding of 'proper spaces' of Englishness, that is locations which most effectively cultivated a loyalty to the nation which is in turn translated into a physical state as personified by the peasant.⁹¹ Such spaces articulated difference and parochialism, rejecting the homogenizing tendencies of Empire and scientific modernism, while attesting to represent the strongest form of patriotism. Thus a refusal to accept the notion of 'Mother Country' was exhibited in fears that Britain was reduced to becoming a breeding ground for colonial races. Within the jingoism of Empire, the loss of the rural dweller from English soil was more than complimented by his or her transportation onto the land of North America or Australasia. This extirpation of vernacular forms of Englishness in favour of universal forms was evident in the undeniable preference for and moral justification to situate potential emigrants on colonial soil rather than allow migrants to inundate the cities of Britain. Here was a unmistakable dismissal of the elevated status of the English countryside which roughly portrayed Collings as a Pastoral rhapsodist. In effect this argument over the primacy of English space becomes a struggle between the mundane and tangible over the 'vanity', improvidence and perceived unpatriotic behaviour of imperialists, colonialists and the supporters of mass emigration. Thus the *patria* of land reformers articulated something substantial, something 'real' and, most importantly something immediate and undiluted. Concentration of the pure English spirit in the few was infinitely preferable to its dissipation amongst the many. *Patria* for them was defined, therefore, as a question of territory and residency within that particularized space.

Once again, a simple demidiation only serves to hinder a more comprehensive understanding of the contemporary debate. The subtleties of position were perhaps best expressed in a series of correspondences published in *The Times* during 1916 between Rider Haggard, who was about to embark on a fact finding mission to the Dominions on behalf of the Royal Colonial Institute to investigate the potential for settling soldiers returning from World War I on foreign soil, and an ageing Jesse Collings who had recently announced his intention to stand down from Parliament at the next election.⁹² Both men had been championed as saviours of the English countryside, but as the letters reflected there was a severe difference of opinion with regard to soldiers resettlement. On 2 February 1916 *The Times* reported the speeches made in honour of Sir Rider Haggard at the Royal Colonial Institute. The tone of the affair was set by Lord Curzon's introductory comments that serious consideration was

needed with regard to the settlement of soldiers on the lands of Empire. Agricultural employment was deemed preferable because 'the vast majority of the men would have been engaged for two years or more in the open air...would they be willing to go back to the factory, workshop or office stool?'⁹³ In direct contradiction to Collings's claim that the English countryside was among some of the most sparsely populated in Europe, Curzon suggested there was no room on English soil and alternative land overseas would have to be sought. In just one phrase he summed up every imperialist sentiment which proved such an anathema to Collings's position. 'They wanted', Collings stated in reference to the Royal Colonial Institute, 'those British citizens to rear British families in British lands, and to add to the economic and industrial strength of the British empire'. Haggard, in response to the recitations also reinstated the need to secure emigrants upon British soils overseas, firmly believing in the fertility of opportunities in countries like Australia where he was convinced that up to 50,000,000 people could be accommodated on the land.

For Collings, the nuances of Haggard's argument were not discernible as he seized on an apparently conspicuous betrayal of all the sentiments that Haggard had expressed in his ruralist work. A betrayal of England could lead to only one conclusion: its enforced enfeeblement. World War I had focused more sharply than thirty years of agricultural depression the patriotic need for a comprehensive system of resettlement on the soil, with English small holdings best serving this conviction. Critical of Haggard's sentiments as being deeply unpatriotic, Collings suggested men who had fought so bravely in defence of the nation deserved more than to be, in effect, deported overseas. Once again by evoking ancient history, Collings draws inspiration from Rome when retiring soldiers would have a small farm provided to enable a living to be earned and offer a continuation of productive employment.⁹⁴ However, there contains more than a mild sense of pathos within Collings's correspondence, conveyed most plainly in his automatic responses, undoubtedly a product of his great age. In a comparatively short letter he manages to reiterate all his usual themes: that restrictive landownership undermined farming (a sensitive issue during wartime when food supplies were heavily diminished); that the centrality of the rural milieu to the national well-being, in both spiritual and material terms was neglected (this was a reinforcement of his argument with regard to the 'hollowness' of England, in part a problem of emigration); and finally that a continued diminution of the rural population would only reaffirm the loss of a productivity aesthetic, with the 'desert-like qualities' of the countryside becoming a metaphor for the barrenness of modern English life.⁹⁵ Haggard's response, though gracious, was telling in its criticism of Collings's blinkered and allegedly unworkable solution.⁹⁶ His criticism insinuated that implementation costs of a small holding scheme would place

enormous burdens on the tax payer, and following the end of the war would still not be able to guarantee a route out of agrarian depression. With emigration, Dominion governments would defray the cost of resettlement. Furthermore, Haggard found no evidence to suggest that the Dominion soldiers, especially those recruited from country areas had fought any less committed or strong during the war, the implication being that nurture within an English set of values rather than biology instilled the individuals with the qualities so cherished, and for the sake of empire, these could be guaranteed overseas. Nevertheless, Haggard expressed concern that only Anglo-Saxon blood should be transfused into the colonies. Any Teutonic infiltration would threaten racial purity and imperial commitment. Collings was now attacked from two salient points. His corporeal theories were always open to speculation, but now the patriotic justification for a reformed peasantry within his peculiar brand of 'little England' ideology was heavily undermined.

There was to be a further round of confrontational letters before the issue passed away as swiftly as it had arisen. Haggard contested the claim that soldiers would be 'transmigrated...against their will' while Collings still firmly believed that 'soldiers have a paramount claim to be settled on the land of their country'.⁹⁷ Clearly for Haggard, the small holding issue in England was fading, particularly as Collings, the most vocal supporter of such schemes was becoming impossibly entrenched in his views. In the past Haggard had equally supported the programme of land reform, but by 1916, little evidence was forthcoming that the labourer's life had really improved, whereas the success stories from the Empire revealed macroscopic expressions of prosperity. Colonial emigration offered a new alternative, particularly as land was not subject to the same restrictions of ownership. However, as a letter from George H. Jones, an Australian, illustrated, there was only muted support for mass in-migration from Britain. Indeed, the Australian government was more concerned with settling her own soldiers before directly providing land for British immigrants.⁹⁸

The debate on the resettlement of soldiers typified the patriotic divisions of the period. For Collings the fear of 'the unknowable' if the nation continued to invest heavily in Empire while neglecting itself persisted. Two issues arise from this judgement. Firstly, by placing Empire at the antithesis of a celebration of specifically English space, imperialism would, logically, be inherently modernist and this was not necessarily true. Secondly, and of more interest to us here, the notion of England had become increasingly unfamiliar, consequently creating a need to colonize the rural heartland to rediscover the true essence of the nation. As I have attempted to demonstrate, activists like Collings sought small holdings as a route to discover rural England and to cement its values for posterity. Only rural England could dispense the *authentic* English experience. If imperialism had created an amorphous political

entity, then the small holding programme went some way, at least in theory, of grounding what was understood by the term Englishness, by spatialising the concept while providing a historical rigidity for the future of England.

Section Conclusion

Situated within a classic tension between broader society and community, small holdings by encouraging the evolution of village-based programmes of reform, revealed the importance of parochial geographies to some as a defining English trait, particularly at a time when England abandoned provincialism for the global imperial quest. Collings's *petite culture* plan enabled the ideological appropriation of the rural milieu as a cultural symbol of nationhood as well as a place where wider social and political 'questions' could be resolved, without resorting to reactionary nostalgia. Economic and social solutions for a future post-capitalist agrarian age were translated into rural virtues or expressions of moral pre-eminence. The corruption of an agricultural system which lined the pockets of a wealthy landed aristocracy was challenged by new economic strategies such as small foodstuff production on owner-occupied plots that merged with notions of spiritual elevation and a sense of personal self-fulfilment through the dignity of individual labour.

The work of Collings should not be seen purely as an attempt to map English reactionary identity, a romantic image of the past, onto a modern landscape. However, his silence on alternative rural industries within a bucolic ideal suggest Collings considered agricultural revivalism as the only viable solution to rural deprivation. At no point in his treatise are light industries presented as an option for those disillusioned by agriculture. Indeed, juxtaposed to Ebenezer Howard's equally Utopianist Garden City plans, Collings's formulations appeared to a wider non-specialist audience distinctly unfashionable, ill-conceived and hopelessly outdated.⁹⁹ Significantly, he did not propose a return of other industries to a domestic scale of manufacture. Evidently, the pervasive conservatism engendered within agriculture provided the most feasible opportunity to resist on-going capitalism. Collings's clearest statement of his anti-consumerist intent was manifest in his last noteworthy contribution to the swelling corpus of land reform literature, *The Colonization of Rural Britain: A complete scheme for the regeneration of rural life*.

*A main argument throughout this book is that commercialism, though useful and desirable as an adjunct, is by itself, an untrustworthy basis of securing the permanent safety and prosperity of a nation, and that Mother Earth is the only sure foundation for the economy of a country to rest on.*¹⁰⁰

Collings consistently argued against the promotion of capital gain over spiritual fulfilment. As early as his chapter for *The Radical Programme* in 1885, he berated the 'narrow aims' of orthodox economic theory, recognising that subscribers to that school would find little of interest in his proposals.¹⁰¹ Instead a new moral wealth could be earned through the intense application of labour. Furthermore any financial reward from the successful cultivation of peasant holdings could be ploughed back into the farm for individual consumption.¹⁰² For Collings, it was widely believed that an inward investing home market would more than compensate for a general downturn in commercial activities following the abandoned consumption of overseas goods. Britain increasingly relied on foreign markets for foodstuffs because the home market was insufficiently developed or co-ordinated to service the demands of rapid urban growth. To illustrate the point, Henry Harben prophesized small holdings offered the only viable solution to the supply shortfall, appealing to notions of intensive production and national strength. 'Small holdings pay' he claimed 'because our big towns now demand what small holdings can best supply; and failing to get it they import it from abroad...our soil is undercultivated!'¹⁰³ A prosperous peasantry installed on the land within the alternative Ruralist modernising vision could supply urban demand and offer a replacement market for urban goods in the event of decreased reciprocity within foreign markets towards British manufactures following a self-imposed economic isolationist stance.¹⁰⁴

Catshill as the prototype experiment ultimately served to be a catalyst for further questions on depression. It placed many on the land where one had once farmed. It succeeded in demonstrating the profitability of farming if imaginations were shifted from traditional mixed or arable farming techniques to embrace the production of capital crops. It also illustrated that people with little experience of working the soil could eke out an existence. The colony provided a lesson in conquering resistance to land reform and the need to carefully nurture those for whom the methods of the soil were alien or perhaps a distant childhood memory. However, the harsher reality intensified evolving criticism of the 1892 Act, revealing that capital and time far beyond the resources of most labourers was required for the successful running of a holding constructed along the lines of the Catshill experiment.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, in this specific case it demonstrated that co-operative systems were not subsequently adopted by newly-made small holders.¹⁰⁶

Collings's reading of depression was constructed through an abstraction of agrarian hearsay, myth and despair. His small holding scheme in response presented a landscape of transformation that did not involve an erasure of the farm labouring population, the inevitable conclusion of an increased technological and scientific drive. For him, agrarian depression eroded the vitality of farming and the cradle of

nationhood.¹⁰⁷ Englishness was not just a biological construction, but also a way of life, a mode of thinking, a cultural difference that needed to be nurtured. The village represented the nursery, and the peasant farmer, its most tangible physical expression. Making a direct link between agriculture and patriotism Collings propounded that the essence of Englishness was distilled within the village. Small holdings offered the most viable hope of maintaining people in the spaces least affected by modern cosmopolitan capitalism. This ensured the continued existence of English vernacular culture.

Ultimately Collings was undone through resistance to his ideas by the landed establishment; alternative ideologies vying for the rural mandate and a variety of other urban interests. Catshill offered insufficient evidence to claim that English farming could sustain an alternative route to modernity based upon reorganisation rather than technology. For small holdings to deliver the whole land reform ideal, the freedom to cultivate had to be asserted. The provision of land was in reality, only half the remedy. The idea of ennobling space was not, therefore, solely about occupation of the soil, but rather complete self-determination. The Catshill scheme demonstrated that when applied, the idealistic principles of small holding theory were remote from actual experiences. Furthermore, the fallacy of founding an ideology upon a mythologised vision of the past, however progressive in outlook, was exposed by the failings of the Catshill residents. The peasant archetype was simply an unobtainable and inauthentic figure. Had his plans for the reconstitution of the English countryside been pursued to their logical conclusion then the history of twentieth-century agriculture would tell a very different and unfamiliar tale.

¹*The Times* 1st May 1907 col. d. 7 - The Small Landholders (Scotland) Bill.

²Select Committee Report with Proceedings and Minutes of Evidence (1889) 74.

³Socialist land plans, which have not been the concern of this thesis, containing similar degrees of cultural envisionment, were by their nature inherently more politically charged rather than spiritually motivated, with the added impetus of attacking the injustices of property and power that land ownership retained.

⁴Shurmer-Smith and Hannam argue that Geographers have only recently realised the significance of the imagined realm. P. Shurmer-Smith and K. Hannam, *Worlds of Desire, Realms of Power: A Cultural Geography* (London 1994) 59.

⁵Paul Rich advises that had the imperial sentiment been taken to an extreme it would clearly have superseded the sense of English space in favour of an all-encompassing global vision. Evidently, the level of spatial interaction is important and should not be overlooked. P. Rich (1987), *Op Cit.* As James Anderson asserts, nations are not simply located in space, but places of difference and distinction. J. Anderson, *Nationalist Ideology and Territory* in R.J. Johnston, D. Knight and E. Kofman (Eds) *Nationalism, Self-Determination and Political Geography* (London 1988). Grainger typifies the movement as one which sought the re-assertion of traditions that had been lost in what was seen as a conspiratorial *troika* of finance, militarism and the agents of Empire. J.H. Grainger, *Patriotisms: Britain 1900-1939* (London 1986) 140-154.

⁶A *Rural World* essay on 'The Land and the People', warned that as many as nine in ten urban migrants would probably lose money should they set up small holdings. *Rural World* Vol. 14. No. 658, February 1902, 47.

⁷The Salvation Army purchased 3,000 acres to form the land colony of 400 men at Hadleigh. The land was actually very stiff clays though was worth £20 per acre. Haggard describes the motivation for the land colony thus: 'The object of the Hadleigh Colony is to supply a place where broken men of bad habits, who chance in most cases to have had some connection with or liking for the land can be reformed, and ultimately sent out to situations, or as emigrants to Canada'. The theme that Haggard touches upon is the idea of the regenerative qualities of the rural milieu. However, harking back to the biology/environmental deterministic arguments of the Condition of Rural England debates, though the idea of regeneration is based upon environmental debates, the belief that the town-bred could never return profits like the rural-born, despite tutoring in the ways of small farming hints at biologism. H.R. Haggard, *Regeneration: Being an Account of the Social Work of the Salvation Army in Great Britain* (London 1910) 196 and 207.

⁸*Rural World* Vol. 13 No. 644, 20 April 1901, 301 - The Townsman on the Land.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰This conflict is slightly artificial in that even the most rationalised of the agrarian solutions contained some over-indulgent rustic exuberance.

¹¹R. Williams, *The Country and the City* (London 1973) 248.

¹²M.J. Wiener (1981) *Op Cit.* 49.

¹³B. Anderson, *Op Cit.* 5; P. Rich (1987), *Op Cit.*

¹⁴Wiener believed the movement lacked the popularist support that motivated the Irish land reform campaign. He draws his evidence from J.R. Fisher's conclusion that economic arguments for small holdings were weak and inadequate to resolve the questions posed by depression. M.J. Wiener, *Op Cit.* 181. J.R. Fisher, *Public Opinion and Agriculture 1875-1900* (Unpubl. PhD. Thesis. University of Hull 1972).

¹⁵Martin Wiener describes this trend as a preoccupation with the past for its own sake. M.J. Wiener, *Op Cit.* 42

¹⁶M.J. Wiener, *Op Cit.* 7; J. Herf, *Reactionary Modernism* (Cambridge 1984) 1. The most obvious and well rehearsed example of this contrasts is between Britain and Germany, where in the latter, the industrial conversion was swifter and less painful to the psyche.

¹⁷C. Williams and A.D. Smith, *The National Construction of Social Space Progress in Human Geography* 7 (1983) 502-518.

¹⁸Critiquing the general nineteenth-century love of the past, Yates asserts the appeal to the Medieval age was 'serious and mainstream', perhaps because many in society still subscribed to a belief in the existence of some faint tangibility with the past, manifest in a rural existence. N. Yates, Pugin and the Medieval Dream *History Today* 37.9 (1987) 33-41. Schama describes this process as a seeking of illumination for the present and future. S. Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London 1995) 17.

¹⁹Anon., The Reform of Farming *The Nation* 16 (1915) 770-771.

²⁰C.M. Aikman, *Op Cit.* Aikman berates those who rejected the need for science in agriculture. 'It is an old objection, and begot of ignorance, that science can do nothing for the agriculturalist'.

²¹"Their claim was that Germany could be *both* technologically advanced *and* true to its soul.'. J. Herf, *Op Cit.* 3.

²²A.G. Gardiner, Introduction, in C.F.G. Masterman, *et al. To Colonise England: A Plea for Policy*. xiv.

²³Anon. (1915) *The Reform of Farming*.

²⁴P.H. Ditchfield, *Rural England* (London 1912) ii.

²⁵Thirsk suggested that nearly a dozen seminal titles on agrarian historical interest were produced between 1907 and 1915. These included: W.H.R. Curtler, *A Short History of English Agriculture* (Oxford 1909); Ernle, Lord *English Farming Past and Present* (London 1912); E.C.K. Gonner, *Common Land and Inclosure* (London 1912); H.L. Gray, *English Field Systems* (London 1915); J.L. and B. Hammond, *The Village Labourer* (London 1911); W. Hasbach, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer* (London 1908); A.H. Johnson, *The Disappearance of the Small Landowner* (Oxford 1909); H. Levy, *Large and Small Holdings* (London 1911); G. Slater, *The English Peasantry and the Enclosure of the Common Fields* (London 1907) and R.H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (London 1912). J. Thirsk (1963), *Op Cit.* v-xiii.

²⁶Dewey suggests at the end of the nineteenth-century there was increasing unease over the role of enclosures in the history of farming success. Reflective of the revival of political economic interest with the peasant in figures like J.S. Mill, W.T. Thornton and Richard Jones, enclosures were interpreted as an 'act of usurpation unparalleled in English history'. C.J. Dewey, *The Rehabilitation of the peasant proprietor in Nineteenth-Century Economic Thought History of Political Economy* 6 (1975) 17-47.

²⁷Anon. (1915) *The Reform of Farming*.

²⁸W.H.R. Curtler, *The Enclosure and Redistribution of Our Land* (Oxford 1920). He devotes three chapters, all called 'Redistribution and Replacement', to the modern small holding question. His conclusion based upon a landlord approach to history rejected a return to peasant holdings as a viable future for English farming.

²⁹J. MacDonald (1888), *Op Cit.*

³⁰T.E. Kebbel, *History of Small Holdings Blackwoods Magazine* 151 (1892) 589-601.

³¹The Rev. A.H. Baverstock claimed Thorold Rogers was an undoubted authority on the subject. A.H. Baverstock, *The English Agricultural Labourer* (London 1912) 10.

³²J.E.T. Rogers, (1887) *Op Cit.* 539. To further enhance his claim Roland Prothero did not dispute Rogers's interpretation of the Medieval peasantry. In a paper for the *Quarterly Review* Prothero conveyed a vivid picture of peasant wealth. 'Between 1389 and 1444 the wages of agricultural labourers doubled: harvests were plentiful; beef mutton and pork became their food: sumptuary laws attest their prosperity: the standard purity of the coinage was steadily maintained'.

³³Rev. A.H. Baverstock, *Op Cit.* iv.

³⁴Samuel Milliken was one of the most firm believers of an establishment conspiracy. Rogers had been dismissed for pointing out the 'tragedy of British history', 'he traced as he said "certain mischiefs to their root". The so called "aristocracy" of England at once took alarm at his showings, and he was dismissed from his position'. S. Milliken, *A Tragedy of English History* (London n.d.). Rogers's Radical tendencies suggest Collings could well have been influenced by his economic findings. Rogers had played an important role in the growing agitation for land though there appears to have been little contact with Jesse Collings. Indeed, he had been a central organising figure in the J.S. Mill sponsored Land Tenure Reform Association which campaigned for taxation on rents. H.J. Perkin, *Op Cit.* 194.

³⁵Whether the dating of such abstract concepts as an 'agricultural revolution' can ever be produced is highly debatable and as recent historical research indicates, there is widespread disagreement amongst historians over the length of the overhaul, which could have lasted for three hundred years, in which case 'revolution' as a epithet should probably be discarded, with the innovations that fall into this period merely being considered as the inevitable results of technological progression over time. Mark Overton suggests that there are three periods of 'revolution' favoured: Period I = 1750-1850; Period II = 1650-1750 and Period III = 1560-1767 (with most change before 1673). Furthermore, we cannot rule out that there had already been an awakening to the 'improver' sham as best exemplified by the fact that 'Turnip' Townshend was little more than a very good self-publicist. M. Overton, *Agricultural Revolution? England 1540-1850* in A. Digby and C. Feinstein (Ed) *New Directions in Economic and Social History* (London 1989) 12.

³⁶E.L. Jones, *Agriculture and the Industrial Revolution* (Oxford 1974) 89.

³⁷As Eric Kerridge contends, 'second only to the wealthy farmers in taking up and bringing in the new improvements were the landowners'. E. Kerridge, *The Farmers of Old England* (London 1973) 133.

³⁸E.A. Pratt, *Small Holders: What they must do to succeed* (Oxford 1909) 232-233.

³⁹J.L.F.H.M. Hueffer, *The Heart of the Country* (London 1911) 199.

⁴⁰Ibid. 123.

⁴¹M. Overton, *Op Cit.* 9.

⁴²'There can be no doubt that the country houses of England made a distinct contribution to the national life in the eighties and nineties. On the whole the class they represented was a serious and responsible one'. V. de Bunsen, *Old and New in the Countryside* (London 1920) 21.

⁴³W.H.R. Curtler (1920), *Op Cit.* 263.

⁴⁴W.H.R. Curtler (1909), *Op Cit.* 66.

⁴⁵W.H.R. Curtler (1920), *Op Cit.* 66.

⁴⁶W.H.R. Curtler (1920), *Op Cit.* 294.

⁴⁷R.E. Prothero (1888), *Op Cit.* 136.

⁴⁸R.E. Prothero (1887), *Op Cit.*; R.E. Prothero (1888), *Op Cit.* 126.

⁴⁹R.E. Prothero (1888), *Op Cit.* 126.

⁵⁰O.M. McGregor, 'Introduction to Lord Ernle's "English Farming Past and Present"' (London 1961) *lxxxi*.

⁵¹Certainly, Prothero's experience of the French peasantry did not lend itself to land reform ideals in England. R. Prothero(1885), *Op Cit.* 'The hard fare and filthy homes of the French peasantry, even on the favoured districts of the Limagne, are far below the standard of comfort of the English labourer'.

⁵²R.E. Prothero, (1888) *Op Cit.* 131; J.B. Lawes and J.H. Gilbert, *The Depression of Corn Prices and the Production of Wheat in Some of the Chief Exporting Countries of the World* *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 6 (3rd series) (1896) 620-635.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴R.E. Prothero, *Patriotism and Agriculture* *Edinburgh Review* 222 406-426. R.E. Prothero, *English Farming Past and Present* (London 1912) 424. 'Progress...[of small holding construction] was in decline when in 1914 the war put an end to such activities'.

⁵⁵R.E. Prothero(1912), *Op Cit.* 428.

⁵⁶This represents a conceptual shift for the agrarian small holding movement beyond the symbolic return of land rights to the actual encouragement of people out from the towns of Britain.

⁵⁷*The Times* 19 October 1909 col. e, 12 - Jesse Collings and Rural Labourers.

⁵⁸The freer life, the easy facilities for becoming a landowner, the wider scope for energy and enterprise, and the higher wages for manual labour are the prospects which appear to be the chief inducements to our rural population to emigrate. These prospects appeal especially to those who do not wish to leave the land, but do not see in this country a reasonable chance of living by it'. *The Times* 19 December 1913, Col. d, 5 -The Rural Exodus - Migration to the Dominions.

⁵⁹J. Collings (1914), *Op Cit.*

⁶⁰*Ibid.* 5.

⁶¹J. Collings, *The Great War: Its Lessons and Its Warnings* (London 1916) 79. P. Horn, *Rural Life in England in the First World War* (Dublin 1984) 72.

⁶²Board of Agriculture and Fisheries (1913) *Report on Migration From Rural Districts in England and Wales*. The report was requested by the Dominions Royal Commission in an attempt to understand patterns of migration. Schedules were despatched by the Board of Agriculture to the secretaries of local chambers of agriculture and other bodies associated with the central chamber to ascertain approximate figures of population loss and its affect on farm labour. To enhance the broader picture, the opinions of local co-operatives and other bodies affiliated to the Agricultural Organisation Society were elicited. J.S. Nicholson, *The Relations of Rents, Wages and Profits in Agriculture and Their Bearing on Rural Depopulation* (London 1906) 131.

⁶³Emigration had been one of the initial responses to agricultural depression, being at its most heavy during the period 1881-90. Following a sharp reduction in the 1890s, rural migration was revived at the start of the twentieth century in the period up to the outbreak of World War I. W.A. Armstrong, Kentish Rural Society during the First World War in B.A. Holderness and M. Turner (Eds) *Land, Labour and Agriculture, 1700-1920* (London 1991) 109-131.

⁶⁴Frank firmly believed that the increased emigration to Canada in particular was a cause of great concern, reckoning that the Dominion government was highly organized in their campaign to attract disaffected farm workers. *The Times* 9 June 1913, col. f, 14 - Emigration and Agriculture: A Warning Letter to the Editor by Howard Frank.

⁶⁵*The Times* 21 May 1913, col. c, 6 - The Tide of Emigration. *The Times* 22 December 1913, col. e, 5 - Emigration to the Dominions - The Flow From the Rural Districts.

⁶⁶J.O. Smith, Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Dominions Royal Commission. Part I: Migration. (1989) c6515, q1,780, 90.

⁶⁷Capt. Howard, secretary of the Emigration Department of the Church Army, stated 'I believe the Canadian farmers prefer a man who will learn the Canadian ways and who will have nothing to unlearn - in other words, who is prepared to be taught the Canadian ways from the beginning'. Capt. Howard. (1912) Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Dominions Royal Commission. Part I: Migration. Cd 6515, q1,374, 66.

⁶⁸Board of Agriculture and Fisheries (1913) *Op Cit.* 3.

⁶⁹*The Times* 19 December 1913, col. d, 5 - The Rural Exodus - Migration to the Dominions. One respondent from Lancashire to the survey questions sent out by the Board of Agriculture proved very critical of the enticing adverts and particularly their promotion at agricultural fairs. Board of Agriculture and Fisheries (1913) *Op Cit.* 9.

⁷⁰Anon., The Vanishing Peasant *The Nation* 14 27 December 1913 561-562. Anon., Events of the Week *The Nation* 14 27 December 1913, 558. Collings wrote along a similar theme stating that 'The dullness of village life in England which is so often complained of is as nothing compared with the isolated existence of the settler on the only land which is offered to him free'. J. Collings (1914), *Op Cit.* 8.

⁷¹Collings was particularly critical of the selection process by the Salvation Army for leaving behind the undesirables whilst also condemning 'General' Booth's arguments for emigration to solve the surplus population crisis as specious, neglecting the fact that the English countryside was nearly deserted. *The Times* 28 September 1905, col. f, 13 - "General" Booth's Emigration Scheme. Letter to the Editor by Jesse Collings. *The Times* 3 October 1905, col. c, 4 - Salvation Army Emigration.

⁷²J. Collings 1914), *Op Cit.* xxix.

⁷³Ibid. 37.

⁷⁴J. Collings (1914), *Op Cit.* xxii.

⁷⁵P. Rich (1987), *Op Cit.*

⁷⁶J. Collings (1914), *Op Cit.* 49.

⁷⁷R.E. Prothero (1915), *Op Cit.*

⁷⁸Ibid. 15.

⁷⁹Joseph Grant, representing the British Passenger Agents' Association, in giving evidence before the Dominions Royal Commission suggested '...it is the wasters who are of no use here who are no use in the Colonies. That is what we recommend, at least I do. If we get a man who has been a good servant and who has a good character on a farm, he is sure to do well in the Colonies'. J. Grant, (1912) Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Dominions Royal Commission. Part I: Migration. Cd 6515, q3,120, 163.

⁸⁰J. Collings (1885), *Op Cit.*

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Hansard Vol. CLXXX (1907) 16 August 1829-33.

⁸³J. Collings (1906), *Op Cit.* x..

⁸⁴J. Collings (1914), *Op Cit.* 3.

⁸⁵Evidently, there was an urgency to reverse colonial attraction and this could be achieved through the prospect of tilling owner occupied soil. *The Times* 1 November 1912, col. d, 14 - Emigration From England. Letter to the Editor by Jesse Collings.

⁸⁶J. Collings (1916), *Op Cit.* 11.

⁸⁷*The Times* 1 July 1914, col. e, 9 - Emigration and Rural Depopulation.

⁸⁸Ibid. 309.

⁸⁹Addressing the Select Committee on Small Holdings in 1889, Collings reaffirms the need for personal attention from the cultivator to get the best and largest production out of the soil. It was impossible for the large farmer using hired labour to achieve the same effect. J. Collings, Select Committee on Small Holdings. Final Report. (1889) c313, 15.

⁹⁰Hansard records Collings despairing at the millions of acres of couch grass and abandoned farmland that could be used so productively. When he suggests that this is a 'great national loss' he refers not only to the wasted economic potential, but also the possibilities of reinvesting in a new rural future. Hansard Vol. CLXXX 16 August 1907, 1831.

⁹¹'During the whole of the present century the English peasant has been learning to lose this unreasoning love of his native country; by millions they have left our shores, and now those who remain cry to us for help and sympathy. J. Collings (1882), *Op Cit.*

⁹²In 1906, Rider Haggard had written a report on Agricultural Settlements in British Colonies for a Colonial Departmental Report.

⁹³*The Times* 2 February 1916 col. f, 6 - Soldiers as Settlers - Sir Rider Haggard's Oversea Mission. Such sentiments were echoed by Collings in his 1916 publication. 'The returned soldiers will have been accustomed to pick and spade work, digging trenches, etc. and generally to an outdoor life. The influence of these conditions and the excitement of military life generally will disincline most of the men to return to their former occupations, even if such occupations were open to them, which is doubtful'. J. Collings (1916), *Op Cit.* 10.

⁹⁴*Ibid.* 12. Collings was not alone in drawing lessons from Rome. Haughton found a direct comparison between Britain and Rome. 'Of all the great nations who have left their impression upon the history of the world, England most nearly resembles Rome, and agriculture was the nursing mother of both'. J. Haughton, *The Depression in Agriculture With a Proposal for its Remedy* (London 1879) 29. "Persimmon" also feared that England would follow the same path of Rome stating that 'as it was in Rome, so I fear it will be in England, unless urgent and immediate measures are taken to prevent the storm that has long been brewing from breaking over our heads'. "Persimmon" *Op Cit.* 106.

⁹⁵*The Times* 5 February 1916 col. c, 7 - Soldiers as Settlers - A Letter to the Editor by Jesse Collings M.P.

⁹⁶*The Times* 7 February 1916 col. d, 9 - Soldiers as Settlers - A Letter to the Editor by H. Rider Haggard in Response to Jesse Collings.

⁹⁷Ever the politician, Collings still argued that a degree of compulsion would have to exist to send returning soldiers overseas. Extending facilities for easy migration overseas while offering no provision for settling the men on land back home, was a method of indirect compulsion. *The Times* 9 February 1916 col. c, 9 - Soldiers as Settlers - A Letter to the Editor by Jesse Collings's M.P. *The Times* 10 February 1916 col. d, 9 - Soldier Settlers: The Future of Rural England - A Letter to the Editor by Rider Haggard. *The Times* 12 February 1916 col. e, 7 - Soldiers as Settlers.

⁹⁸*The Times* 15 February 1916 col. d, 9.

⁹⁹Though both sets of ideas ran concurrent, both aimed at tackling different social problems, one from an urban perspective, the other resolving a rural social and economic crisis.

¹⁰⁰This statement most explicitly revealed Collings's disenchantment with market forces. His stance is particularly ironic when his background in the iron trade is considered. J. Collings (1914), *Op Cit.* xxii.

¹⁰¹J. Collings, *Op Cit.* 118.

¹⁰²Addressing the St. Thomas's Ward of the Liberal Association, Birmingham, Collings highlighted how there would be less capital leakage with small holdings than was used to under the patriarchal methods of farming. 'By assisting a peasant...to increase the production of the land, you produce that for which there is a demand; new wealth is made out of mother earth, to be spent in implements, tools, boots, clothes, etc. to the certain benefit of the whole community'. J. Collings, *Op Cit.*

¹⁰³The italics are Harben's. H.D. Harben, *The Rural Problem* (London 1913) 53.

¹⁰⁴The result [of peasant propriety] is a thickly populated country of well-to-do peasantry, who are the best customers for the goods produced in their own cities'. J. Ferguson, *The Land for all the People - An appeal to all who work by brain or hand* (London, n.d.).

¹⁰⁵Detractors, such as F.J. Coverdale, the prominent agent to Lord Petre, the Essex landowner, branded the small holding solution as an irresponsible 'fantasy for faddists'. The economic reality did not offer a viable route out of the cycle of depression. See Letter by F.J. Coverdale to R.H. Pringle on the Depression. Essex Record Office D/DPE121. Mr J. Standring, a small farmer from Epworth in Lincolnshire, in giving evidence to the small holding Select Committee dismissed the idea that a profitable existence could be sustained on a holding of five acres, advancing a figure or nearer ten acres to ensure a degree of 'comfort' without depending on an outside wage. J. Standring, *Minutes of Evidence from the Select Committee on Small Holdings* (1889). c313, q3,205, 181

¹⁰⁶Thornley recorded in his report for the *County Council Times* that there was little evidence of communal practices, especially in the retail of crops to Midlands markets.

¹⁰⁷For Collings, the 'nation' was England, particularly as his reading of the geographical occurrence of depression appears to exclude Scotland and Wales.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

10.1 The Ruin of Rural England

The central objective to this thesis has been to expound the many strands of meaning derived by both farmers and the wider general public from the late nineteenth century agricultural depression. Farm failure, was lifted from a functional industrial crisis and elaborately woven into a diffuse collection of discourses fashioned from a Victorian and Edwardian obsession with social psychosis, the 'condition of England'. Rather than concentrate on farming opinion or urban intellectual debates, the thesis has aimed to chart the sequential layering of significant meaning to contemporary comprehension of depression.

Critical to understanding this semiological process is recognising the communication of information across space regionality to such a process. This excites geographical interest because geography determines the nature, direction and extent of information flows through imposing spatial limits to knowledge. These could be physical boundaries or psycho-social impediments, such as the intense localism of village life. The idea that depression as conceived at the local level was mythologised through the absence of communicable ideas proves helpful. Though the economic actuality of depression cannot be denied, perception of the phenomenon bore little resemblance to how fiscal realities were mapped out.

The intention has been to move away from the over-use of 'truths' of depression without denying their physical reality. Imagination and reality were repeatedly fused, leading literary minded commentators on agricultural depression to script their accounts for an urban audience in the language of a bucolic fantasy-rural England. Depression was repeatedly conceived beyond the farming industry as a crisis within an imaginary realm. Each additional order to the semiological chain placed increasing distance between the popular version of depression and the real issues of failure.

Grasping the cultural complexities behind depression is important. Written accounts bequeathed to students of the period, whether personal correspondences between estate agents and landowners, governmental reports or testimonies from farmers diligently recorded by the Condition of Rural England movement, mediate different agendas. In reconstructing contemporary readings of depression, submerged narratives require recognition. To achieve a more sensitive appraisal of vocalised conceptions of depression, each chapter has attempted to reveal some of the disparate meanings attached to failure.

The section on reconceptualising depression uncovers how functional views of distress, held individually and collectively by farmers and the agrarian community,

were heavily invested with personal anxieties. Depression became a state of mind. In the absence of hard empirical fact, which as this thesis has repeatedly contended was unobtainable in any case, farmers appeared to convince themselves of the severity of their own plight. For farmers, the threat from depression was not a theoretical angst, but a practical problem that threatened to undermine livelihoods. Primrose McConnell, one of the successful Scottish migrant farmers that arrived in Essex during the height of the local farming crisis accurately ascribed the depressed farming psychology to ignorance of conditions and possible resolutions existing beyond the parish. Prolonged failure was inflated in magnitude by the resultant stultification of farming minds.¹ The crisis of confidence that struck farming gradually evolved into a form of paranoia, manifest in a sense that farmers had been placed on trial. Continual invocation of the primacy of farming within the national economy and as a unifying symbol of nationhood, left farmers battling with competitive markets and a sense of patriotic responsibility and duty. Eventual public indifference rather than relieve pressure on farmers merely served to frustrate, denying the reassurance many felt entitled to as guardians of the national homeland. Farmers increasingly exculpated themselves from the causes of depression, attributing blame to physical and economic factors beyond their control.

Increasingly mythologised representations of depression laid less in discrepancies between economic fact and imagined failure at the local level, but in the gradual consumption of the idea of depression by wider society at a time of uncertainty. Forming the basis of the second major section, the evolving vogue for reactionary positions, seeking either lessons from the past or the outright indulgence of rustic escapism, informed meanings of depression. Esoteric detail of farm failure was ignored by the vanity of society more concerned with the resoluteness of its own condition. The 'ruin of rural England' as represented by the decline of the country economy was subjugated by the aesthetics of reactionary nostalgia and obtuse theories that dispensed with the vocality of farmers. The depression was appropriated by various groups from pastoral romantics to prosaic Ruralist commentators as a powerful symbol of the crisis facing English national identity, best expressed through the racial issue. Racial degeneracy, a fear most manifest in the alleged declining standards of military recruitment, appeared to possess little in common with depression. The myth of the physically and morally superior rural recruit, the soldier-farmer ideal, emerged to fashion a link between military reversals during the Boer War and inadequate human resources in rural areas. The hypothesis ran that growing reliance on urban recruits in the absence of traditional rural manpower threatened national security. However, the issue was very much an urban-based intellectual crisis evolving from blending popular idealisation with rural reality, owing much to a superficial grasp of the intricacies of farm failure. The generally accepted fact that

depression hit hardest in the south and east of England further challenged the stability of the national homeland. Carefully manicured landscapes of southern England and the people who existed therein were prized as the essence of nationhood. The occurrence of depression in southern England therefore assumed added significance that in a sense diverted attention from the financial implications of agrarian distress. Rural areas faced a growing deficit in young workers as the population aged *in situ* following the exodus of both the enterprising and jobless to English towns or positions overseas. The inability to comprehend depression in real terms prompted the literary rural realist movement to redress the balance between bucolicism and farm functionalism. However, in translating local issues into a national arena, the use of unhelpful cultural values was inevitable to render complex farming debates decipherable.

The final thesis section examined the last layer of meaning applied to depression, the nostalgic reconstitution of rural England within a future vision that addressed farming concerns and wider *fin de siècle* fears. Many different versions of 'back to the land' existed. The schemes presented by Jesse Collings attempted to confront a specifically agrarian economic impasse, though his theories on land reform did share the need for greater social justice with other, more communistic plans. Small holdings emerged as the most discussed agricultural issue of the day. As an idea that also tackled anxieties such as racial decay and the need to preserve ethnic stocks, visions of depression contrived by figures such as Collings assumed enormous significance, dictating legislative responses to farm distress. Despite support in Parliament and the favourable recommendations of numerous farming experts and a committee inaugurated to assess the viability of the small farm resolution, the theories of *la petite culture* were never mapped onto the English landscape to any extent. The plans therefore, responded to the questions posed by depression but remained within the imaginary realm. Meanwhile farmers still teetered on the verge of bankruptcy.

10.2 *The Presence of Geography*

Perhaps the most significant conclusions drawn from this thesis, demonstrate geography in its many forms directly influenced the occurrence of depression, the nature of failure and comprehension of the phenomenon, both in physical and imaginary spheres. Geography operated at many levels from the areally restricted life patterns of the village locale to theorized notions of nation and identity. Geography predicated the role of location in space in governing life chances, determining a variety of factors from physical impediments such as poor, unresponsive soil through to human interaction and the communication of information. It could also refer to the personal spatial ordering of ideas within the minds of farmers, rural observers or any person interested in depression. This thesis has attempted to complement previous historical geographic work by drawing significance from the geographies of various

imaginary realms, deriving equal importance with the mapping of *actual* cases of failure. The idea of a virtual geography is critical to understanding farming behaviour because flaws in the dissemination of information lead not only to myriad representations of the phenomenon, but also rendered the establishment of a unified farming response impossible. Crucially however, the physical and economic reality of depression is not denied.

A series of dichotomies existed within late-Victorian and early-Edwardian minds with regard to the countryside. Conflicting representations arose between the crisis of agriculture/urban-based fears and divisions between functionalist and bucolic perspectives. Each represented criteria that determined a *perceived* geography of depression. Not all divisions were consciously recognised, most notably the distinction between 'reality' and the imaginary realm. Certain dichotomies existed only within a national conceptions of failure, most notably a north/south division. The contention that southern England endured the heaviest aspects of depression is well established in histories of the depression, though until the inauguration of various Parliamentary committees on agriculture, the split appears less obvious to Victorian farmers. However, as repeatedly demonstrated, southern England assumed added cultural significance in the search for a definitive national identity, a cultural movement that paralleled the spread of depression. With the vision of the south country as a cherished landscape, potential for an exaggerated sense of failure embracing this loosely defined area supported by the Victorian tendency for melodrama is obvious.

Within each layering of meaning, geography enacted differing determinants towards conceiving notions of agricultural distress. At the local farming level, the issue of constrained knowledge has been explored. Parochial geographies assume a 'reality' component that is eradicated when these perceptions are transferred to a national level, because cases of failure can be physically experienced. By expanding the spatial conception of depression to a national level, not only is areal sensitivity compromised, but because the experience is now indirect, the depression can only be imagined rather than endured. It is within this transferral between layers that the imagined geography of depression emerges. The technicalities of actual cases of failure are relegated as ambiguously defined fears on the aesthetic significance of tumbledown and the destruction of the cherished features of idyllic rural England, unlocated in real space, assume greater importance. With the advent of the agrarian small holding movement, emphasis is placed on developing a new rural geography as defined by landscape appearance and the revival of social interactions that concentrated on village. One typical geographical idea was the creation of spaces of alternative modernism through the reconstitution of rural England upon the old yeoman farming small holding ideal. Despite recognising the centrality of the parish, solutions proposed by people such as Collings contained a universal component that enabled

schemes such as the Catshill project could be applied across all England. Therefore the geography of the occurrence of failure is almost totally dispensed with as the solutions provided are socially oriented rather than formulated to address specific cases of failure. The ultimate expression of this gradual distancing from actual cases of agricultural distress is reached by the celebration of ennobling space, wherein cultivation upon the soils of a new democratically organised rural England would enable farmers to become fully immersed in the spirituality and moral rectitude of country living. Almost totally removed from depression, the link between ennobling space and farm failure lies in the fact that distress provided the necessary impetus to remove out-moded systems of semi-feudalism. The sequential Victorian expansion of the spatial conception of depression mirrored the broader changes in society as localism and parochial identities were gradually subordinated to nationalism and British imperial identities. The chronological layering of depression equally reflecting the wider social, cultural and economic transformation of the nation.

The late nineteenth century agricultural depression assumed *cultural* meaning equal in importance in defining the phenomenon as the economic downturn. Depression represented a mediation of contrasting psychologies, nearly all of which were overtly fatalistic, escalating the sense of the terminal decline of British agriculture. As debate on the issue of farming distress moved beyond local crisis into a national political, intellectual and literary arena specific cases of failure were mythologised and eventually buried beneath layers of symbolic meaning, so that the depression become yet another issue manipulated to mediate wider social anxieties of the time. However, greater recognition of the discourses from which much of this textual evidence derives is required. Greater comprehension of more literary evidence not only encourages a deeper understanding of how Victorians interpreted depression, but also supplements the reconstruction of an historic landscape.

The second major aim of this thesis beyond reinterpreting the notion of depression has been demonstrating the role of geography in shaping the conceptual basis of the phenomenon. When Perry asks 'where was the great agricultural depression?' his geographical scope is the occurrence of bankruptcy in real space.² This thesis attempts to supplement Perry's research by propounding impacts upon various imaginary geographies were vital in determining the extent and presence of depression, a fact not necessarily realized at the time. The geography of depression as a result cannot be mapped and it is this very ambiguity that led to the initial mythologisation of agricultural distress.

Research was deliberately focused on well-known case studies, because their publicity enabled the greater derivation of meaning on the subject of farm failure by Victorians and Edwardians. Perhaps to extend the study further, enhanced use of

localised literary sources, most notably the local press could prove fruitful. By investigating more locales, a finer spatiality to depression psychology would probably emerge, obviously reflecting actual economic outcomes. Thus at grass roots level, one would suspect, based on the work of Fletcher in particular, farmers in north-western England would remain less fatalistic than southern counterparts.³ An interesting offshoot from such a project would be to establish if the depression prompted some form of psychosis with recorded rates of admittance of farmers into asylums.

Future research could also be directed at determining reasons behind the collapse of the small holding idea. Further work on what constituted specially agrarian, working visions of the countryside that informed schemes such as those developed by Jesse Collings could perhaps provide useful evidence. Given widespread support for small holdings, their absence from the English landscape requires investigation. Altogether, this new research could add to ongoing work into rural landscape change, recognising the centrality of image and reality and the fusion of physical manipulation of space with fantasy. It is hoped, therefore, that the thesis has problematised conventional ways of seeing depression, to disclose the critical importance of geography throughout.

¹The unproven theories of *la petit culture* were touted as the singular longed for 'royal road' to recovery.

²P.J. Perry, 'Where was the 'Great Agricultural Depression'? A Geography of Agricultural Bankruptcy in Late Victorian England and Wales *Agricultural History Review* 20 (1972) 30-45.

³T.W. Fletcher, The Great Depression in English Agriculture 1873-96 *Economic History Review* 13 (2nd series) 417-32.

APPENDIX 1

On a twenty acre farm, Gibbons stated the following figures:

Income:

10 acres of wheat at 5 qtrs an acre : 16 tons of straw = £2 10s per ton = £40
16 tons of corn = £1 10s per qtr = £75
4 acres of roots : at £10 an acre = £40
6 acres of grass: 9 tons of hay = £4 per ton = £36
Total profit for twenty acres = £191

Outgoings:

Rent for house and buildings = £40
Hired Labour for two months at 15s per week = £6
Manure at £1 per acre = £20
Seed = £9
Hire of horses (if not in his own possession) and wear and tear on implements = £20
Total costs for twenty acres = £95

Overall Profit = £96

Source Gibbons, W. (1889) Select Committee on Small Holdings. Report with Proceedings and Minutes of Evidence. p192. q3,558-3,566.

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(Also features comments by **Malcolm Chase**)

Abbreviations

B.C.L.	Birmingham Central Library
B.U.L.	Birmingham University Library
E.R.O.	Essex Record Office
S.L.S.L.	Shropshire Local Studies Library
S.R.O.	Shropshire Record Office
W.R.O.	Worcestershire Record Office