

A South Yorkshire Estate in the Late Nineteenth Century

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AN examination of Lord Scarbrough's estate on the borders of Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire is perhaps helpful in throwing light on the hazards of estate management and farming in the late nineteenth century. Here was an estate of 5,866 acres in 1862, some 18 miles from Sheffield and 10 miles from Doncaster and Rotherham, situated on magnesium limestone in a region of temperate climate. The principal holdings, 21 in number in 1862, were of medium size, the largest 400 acres, the smallest 100 acres. Yorkshire tenant-right customs were observed and the principal occupiers, who paid tithe and rate charges, followed a four-course rotation under the terms of their annual leases. The two landlords of the period, the ninth earl and the tenth earl, who inherited the property in 1884, were resident, improving landlords whose concern for the welfare of the tenantry was unmistakable. If the advantages enjoyed by Lancashire dairy farmers, situated near a railway to a growing industrial town, were absent on this estate, yet so were the disadvantages of the Lincolnshire tenants of the Earls of Scarbrough who, as wheat growers, had to contend with heavy clay soils. The Yorkshire property seems remarkable for its lack of special advantages or difficulties. Perhaps its fortunes suggest what may have been happening on hitherto uninvestigated estates of similar size, location, and structure.¹

The reaction to prevailing trends in agriculture can be examined in a number of ways, but three methods are especially helpful. Changes in the total acreage of the estate can be traced, together with changes in farm size, field layouts, and land utilization. Then movements of rents and arrears can be investigated. Finally, activity which affects 'in hand' acreages, building, draining, and repair can be examined.

Recommendations made by a land valuer who surveyed the estate in 1862 led

¹ The estate records of the Earls of Scarbrough for the late nineteenth century are in the Muniment Room at Sandbeck Park, near Rotherham, Yorkshire. The principal records used in this article were (i) Surveys of the estate: Gee E.M.S. 37, 1813; Downes E.M.S. 41, 1, 1845; Vessey E.M.S. 45, 1862; S. C. Jones E.M.S. 47, 1896; (ii) Farm rentals, 1860-1900: E.M.R. 32-40, 2; (iii) Farm agreements, tenant-right awards, and the farm applications book, 1862-1889; (iv) Estate account books: E.M.A. 85-92; (v) Improvement accounts: E.M.B.A. 2, 2; (vi) Draining accounts: E.M.A. 78; (vii) Land Improvement Company Works: E.M.A. 83, 1-17; (viii) Letter Books, 1860-1900.

to the buying up of the "inlying" fields of other landowners to add to the "compactness" of the estate and to allow rationalized field layouts. The acreages acquired for these reasons were small; less than 300 acres were added before 1872, but the timing of the purchases and the tone of the negotiations leading up to them suggest a desire to increase the acreage, to consolidate the property, and to add to rural amenities by protecting shooting rights. This was succeeded by a definite disinclination to buy land from about 1872 until 1899 when a mining lease was being discussed with a local iron and coal company. From 1862 to 1872 Lord Scarbrough's agent, realizing the competition for land in the district, advised offers in 1868 of £70 an acre for good agricultural land on the limestone. Exchanges of land were a feature of these years. In 1868 Lord Scarbrough was willing to sacrifice 15 acres in an exchange involving 700 acres with two other owners in order to establish two ring-fence farms where previously there had been an area of confused field boundaries separating the property of three owners and five occupiers. This useful reorganization produced a 10 per cent increase of rent from the area affected by the exchange. It was during this period of enterprise that the principal holdings were reduced in number from 21 to 17 and their average field sizes raised from 11 to 14 acres. Attempts were made to enclose and drain the 78 swampy acres of Maltby Common in order to add to the "compactness" of the estate, but the scheme was lost in 1879 largely through the opposition of Rotherham and Sheffield. This was one of the last signs of a desire to increase the acreage for its agricultural worth. After 1872 a number of small local landowners, not owner-occupiers, approached Lord Scarbrough to buy their land. Their offers were invariably declined. In 1884, for example, 465 acres including a house and farm buildings lying close to the estate were offered, but the agent commented ". . . there are so many difficulties now in letting land at a fair rent that Lord Scarbrough does not feel inclined at present to increase his acreage." After 1900, however, until the signing of the mining lease in 1904, the agent began to make approaches to neighbouring proprietors to sell. In some cases they were willing to do so and the land thus added was sometimes at a distance from the estate, of doubtful agricultural value, and had to be let as "separate takes" to the sitting tenants at a very low return. It was estimated, by the agent, that land whose agricultural value was £24 per acre would fetch £100 per acre once knowledge of the mining lease became general. Subsequent land auctions in the district support this estimate. There was little chance of integrating these newly acquired acreages with the rest of the estate, and their purchase reversed the policy of consolidation which had been pursued from 1862 to 1872. By 1900, it seems, the claims of agriculture could not expect to come first on this estate. After all,

as the agent had written in 1892 when 24 acres were being offered to Lord Scarbrough, if purchase were made then the price would have to be "... very low—landed property at the present being a most unprofitable investment."

Was agriculture "a most unprofitable investment" for the tenant farmers? Judging by the fluctuations in rents and arrears, the tenants' views on farming seem to have corresponded with those of their landlord on landowning. From 1860 to 1875 there was a tendency for rents to rise as farm layouts were made more rational and as drainage schemes were completed. Rarely did rents stand at more than 10 per cent in arrears after either of the bi-annual rent days in May and November. In 1878, however, 25 per cent of the total was outstanding when the accounts were drawn up. At the next rent day, in 1879, 30 per cent of the rental was unpaid while at the second rent-day in that year 50 per cent was still outstanding and the first rent day of 1880 saw 67 per cent of the rental unpaid. This was the highest level touched by arrears since 1822. These arrears were not caused by the failure of a few leading tenants to pay on time; they resulted from most tenants paying off only a small proportion of the rent due from them. As rents were paid at a rent-day dinner and the agent usually noted down reactions at these meetings, we are provided with something amounting to a report on what was in effect a conference between management and tenantry. From 1875 the tenants had been expressing anxiety about their prospects, but it was not until 1878 and 1879 that they fell into serious arrears of rent. In 1879 a return of 10 per cent of the half-year's rent was made to the tenants, and later in that year permanent rent reductions amounting to 13 per cent of the rental were made. In 1885 a return of 33 per cent was made on the half-year's rent, probably to mark the succession of the tenth Earl in 1884, but from then on selective rent reductions were made to encourage those tenants with capital and skill to retain their holdings. Tenants whose management was faulty were refused reductions. Arrears fell to 10 per cent of the rental and fluctuated about this figure for the rest of the century. Between 1862 and 1900, the annual value per acre of holdings in the 300-400-acre group fell by 6s. 1d. per acre. Holdings in the 200-300-acre group lost on average 4s. 1d. per acre and those between 100 and 200 acres lost only 1s. 2d. per acre. Two holdings of 288 and 211 acres respectively, situated on the estate's heaviest land where clay overlaid the limestone, lost 8s. 6d. per acre in value in this period. Perhaps the most striking indication of difficulty in these years is the apparent breakdown of continuity of occupation by the leading tenant families. Tenancies were annual and could be terminated each Candlemas. Between 1862 and 1905 on the 17 principal holdings there were 57 changes of occupation. On average, each farm changed hands three times in a period of 43 years. In only four

cases did sons take over from their fathers, and none of them remained longer than ten years after doing so. This failure to maintain continuity of occupation is in contrast to the preceding 40 years and to the succeeding 60, for between 1900 and 1914 a number of families moved on to the estate and "put their roots down." Many of them were still there in 1965. Not one of the occupying families of a principal holding in 1862 occupied the same farm in 1905. The reasons for these changes were not clear in many cases, but there is no evidence to suggest that they were the work of evicting landlords; on the contrary, changes of tenancy were strenuously resisted where the agent and the landlord felt the occupier had the ability to make the farm pay. In 28 out of the 57 changes, debt, bad management, and strained relations with the landlord led to the end of the tenancy. In 11 cases death ended the tenancy, retirement accounted for four changes, and in one case emigration to Tasmania ended the occupation. Where a tenant left in debt, the landlord could recoup his arrears from the outgoing tenant's award. It is possible that the prevailing "heavy" Yorkshire tenant-right custom, which favoured the outgoing tenant, encouraged tenants to leave in search of smaller farms. Perhaps they preferred to leave with their substantial award rather than remain and fall into serious debt. The custom does seem to have deterred applicants for farms after about 1875 when the landlord had to take in hand two farms for a few years until tenants were found and when he had to give financial help to two incoming tenants with their farm valuations.

Bad seasons and low prices were blamed by the agent for the difficulty in securing good tenants, not the heavy tenant-right custom, for this had not proved an obstacle to incomers in the 1850's and 1860's when there had been usually three or four applicants for the larger holdings. In 1876 the agent wrote ". . . this season will give farmers a severe shaking throughout the country . . . and it will be very desirable to prevent changes." In 1879, when urging the need to make a 10 per cent rent return, he observed, "I am quite sure something ought to be done to create confidence or we shall have a lot of bad farms thrown on our hands which will not let." To support his suggestion he pointed out that two local landlords were making 10 per cent returns and two reputable Lincolnshire land agents had informed him that ". . . every large landowner in Lincolnshire is returning 10 per cent and in some cases more." In 1880, however, the agent was optimistic enough to write "I have great hopes now that the bad times are over. . ." Rent reductions to some tenants were still necessary, though only the more deserving received them. One occupier was refused help because his management was bad and his land was "full of twitch and altogether unfit to grow anything." The nine occupiers who were assisted in 1885 were told ". . . it must be

clearly understood . . . that this abatement is made to meet the present depressed state of agricultural matters and must be discontinued in the event of a general improvement taking place." By 1892 the agent reported "All paid up and there was no feeling expressed asking for a reduction of rent—the general impression was that Your Lordship had met them fair as to rent and they must look to some other source to improve matters."

There was little evidence of any change in farming practice to meet the difficulties. Piecemeal conversion of arable to pasture went on between 1886 and 1894, but the total area tackled over the whole estate was only 325 acres. The "in hand" acreage varied as two occupations were farmed by the landlord to restore them to good heart in the 1880's. Even then they were impossible to let without help to the incomer with the valuation for unexhausted improvements. In 1887 the Home Farm was split up between two occupiers who were willing to accept more land. The pattern of expenditure on draining shows that a high proportion was spent on parkland and the Home Farm between 1868 and 1875, while from 1875 to 1880 a renewed effort was made and this time tenanted land received most attention. From 1880 to 1884 about 90 acres a year were tackled for the most part on farms where the limestone was overlaid with clay and where cutting was expensive at the rate of £10 an acre. As with draining, the expenditure on buildings was greatest between 1862 and 1875. During these years the Hall at Sandbeck was enlarged, a chapel was built, new Home Farm buildings were finished, a vicarage was provided in the parish of Maltby, improvements to farmhouses were made, and cottages were built for estate workers and farm labourers. Much of this activity was to make good past neglect, but by comparison with the years 1875–1900 this was a period if not of enterprise then at least of energetic restoration of the fabric of the estate. After 1875 little was attempted in the way of building and nothing more spectacular was undertaken than the laying of water supplies to the farms from the springs on the estate.

Books Received

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| <p>HUDLESTON, N. A., <i>History of Malton and Norton</i>, G. A. Pinder & Son, Scarborough, 1962. xv+220 pp.</p> | <p>PAARLBERG, DON, <i>American Farm Policy</i>. John Wiley & Sons, London & New York. xii+376 pp. 55s.</p> |
| <p>MCÉWAN, GRANT, <i>Between the Red and the Rockies</i>. University of Toronto Press (Reprint), 1964. viii+300 pp. 18s.</p> | <p>RIDGE, MARTIN, <i>Ignatius Donnelly, the Portrait of a Politician</i>. University of Chicago Press, 1962. xii+428 pp. \$7.95.</p> |