

Farm Size in England and Wales, from Early Victorian Times to the Present

By DAVID GRIGG

THE SIZE of farms cannot be said to be a dominant theme in the agricultural history of modern England and Wales; the three essays on agriculture in a recent economic history of modern Britain contain no more than one passing mention of changes in farm size,¹ whilst the topic does not receive much more notice in agricultural histories of modern England.² Further, most of the work on farm size in the last half century has been done by agricultural economists rather than agricultural historians. There was a time, however, when historians were more concerned with farm size, and much of their interest was aroused by two books published at the beginning of this century. Herman Levy argued that between 1750 and 1850 the small farm was largely extinguished by two forces, Parliamentary enclosure and the favourable movement of grain prices relative to livestock prices. J L and Barbara Hammond's book *The Village Labourer* reinforced the view that enclosure was fatal to the small farmer.³

No one now believes that the small farmer was totally eliminated between 1700 and 1851. Sir John Clapham, using the Census

returns, was able to show that small farms, of over 5 acres and less than 100 acres, were 62.5 per cent of all farms in England and Wales in 1851.⁴ Since he wrote there has been comparatively little research on farm size in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but it seems agreed that there was a decline in the number of small farms and a growth of larger farms; however whilst Parliamentary enclosure may have often caused the demise of small farms, amalgamation also went on in areas which had long been enclosed.⁵

Prior to the 1851 Census and the commencement of the agricultural census in 1866 there were no national statistics on the size of farms in England and Wales. On the period since statistics are available — adequate statistics on farm size were first collected by the Board of Agriculture in 1885 — there have been two divergent views. Levy, writing in 1911, argued that the agricultural depression of the 1880s and 1890s, with its falling cereal prices and relatively favourable prices for livestock products and vegetables, led to the reversal of the long-term trend towards large farms.⁶ Some forty years later a number of writers argued that from the 1880s to the 1930s there had been a slow increase in the number of small farms, and a decline in the larger farms; this trend was then reversed, with the large farm increasing and the small farm

¹ E L Jones, 'Agriculture 1700-1800', in R Floud and D McCloskey (eds), *The Economic History of Britain since 1700*, vol 1, 1700-1860, Cambridge, 1981, pp 66-86; G Hueckel, 'Agriculture during industrialisation', *op cit*, pp 182-203; C Ó Gráda, 'Agricultural decline 1860-1914', *op cit*, vol 2, 1860 to the 1970s, Cambridge, 1981, pp 175-97.

² C S Orwin and E H Whetham, *History of British Agriculture 1845-1914*, London, 1964, pp 284-5; P J Perry, *British Farming in the Great Depression 1870-1914: an historical geography*, Newton Abbot, 1974, pp 101-04; Edith H Whetham, *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, vol VIII, 1914-39, Cambridge, 1978, pp 44-5; B A Holderness, *British agriculture since 1945*, Manchester, 1985, pp 127-8.

³ H Levy, *Large and Small Holdings: a study of English agricultural economics*, Cambridge, 1911; J L and Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer*, London, 1911.

⁴ Sir John Clapham, *An economic history of modern Britain: free trade and steel 1850-1886*, Cambridge, 1932, p 264.

⁵ G E Mingay, 'The size of farms in the eighteenth century', *Econ Hist Rev*, 14, 1961-2, pp 469-88; J R Wordie, 'Social change on the Levenson-Gower estates, 1714-1832', *Econ Hist Rev*, 27, 1974, pp 569-98; J V Beckett, 'The debate over farm sizes in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England', *Agricultural History*, 68, 1983, pp 308-25.

⁶ Levy, *op cit*, 1911.

declining.⁷ Others, possibly a majority, emphasized the stability of farm size structure from the 1880s to the 1950s.⁸ However since 1945 there has been universal agreement that the large farm has increased at the expense of the small farm, although because of changes in the definition of a farm in the agricultural census since the 1960s, it has been difficult to trace the more recent trends.⁹

It seems worth reviewing the trends in farm size since 1851 on a number of counts. First, there are several ways of measuring trends in farm size, and these can give apparently contradictory results. Thus it will be shown that although the large farm now occupies more of the agricultural area of England and Wales than it did in 1851, the structure of farm size is very little changed. Second, there have been important changes in the way statistics of farm size are collected, and failure to note this may lead to errors of interpretation. Thus some writers have commented on the dramatic decline in the number of small farms in the 1960s and 1970s without also noting that the Ministry of Agriculture removed more than 50,000 holdings from the census after 1967.¹⁰ Third, it should be recalled that

between 1885 and 1975 there has been a substantial reduction in the area of crops and grass in England and Wales due mainly to urban expansion, and that this in itself would cause a considerable fall in the number of farms even in the absence of amalgamation.¹¹

I

There are various ways of measuring trends in the size of farms or agricultural holdings. One is to trace the changes in the total number of *holdings* over time; unfortunately, for a number of reasons, this gives no necessary indication of changes in the total number of *farms*. Second, the average size of farms can be calculated by dividing the total area occupied by crops and grass on farms by the total number of farms. Again, this has defects: it conceals trends that there may be in different size classes, and exaggerates the importance of the smallest farms which make up a large proportion of all farms but account for a small proportion of the area occupied. A third method is to trace the absolute numbers in each of the size classes published by the Ministry of Agriculture, viz 5–50 acres, 50–100 acres, and so on; and a fourth way is to calculate the *area* occupied by each size class over time. But because there has been a considerable decline in the total area in crops and grass in England and Wales since the 1880s, due to the expansion of non-agricultural land uses, it is necessary to consider the *structure* of farm size; this can be done by calculating the percentage of the *number* of holdings in each size class or the percentage of the *area* occupied by each size class. This distinction is important, for the structure by *numbers* showed little change from Victorian to recent times. On the other hand, there have been major changes in the structure by *area*.

By whatever means farm size is measured, the results depend upon the accuracy and

⁷ D K Britton, 'Are holdings becoming larger or smaller?', *Farm Economist*, 6, 1950, pp 188–97; F W Bateson, 'Farm sizes and layout', in F W Bateson (ed), *Towards a Socialist Agriculture*, London, 1946, pp 106–23.

⁸ G P Hirsch, 'The size of farm holdings in England and Wales', *Farm Econ*, 9, 1958, pp 84–9; M E Rutherford and G P Hirsch, 'The size of farm holdings in England and Wales', *Farm Econ*, 8, 1955, pp 32–41; Sir E J Russell, *Agriculture: today and tomorrow*, 1945, p 6; E J Thomas, *Introduction to Agricultural Economics*, 1949; Viscount Astor and B Seebohm Rowntree, *British Agriculture; the principles of future policy*, Harmondsworth, 1939.

⁹ D K Britton, 'Some explorations in the analysis of long term changes in the structure of agriculture', *Jnl Agric Econ*, 28, 1977, pp 197–209; D K Britton, *The changing structure of British agriculture*, Newton Abbot, 1968; D K Britton and K A Ingersent, 'Trends in concentration in British agriculture', *Jnl Agric Econ*, 16, 1964, pp 26–52; R C Hine, 'Structural policies and British agriculture', *Jnl Agric Econ*, 24, 1973, pp 321–9; S A Robson, 'Agriculture structure in England and Wales 1955–1966; a quantitative analysis', *Farm Econ*, 11, 1970, pp 460–81; F G Sturrock and H J Gunn, 'The development of large scale farming', *Westminster Bank Review*, February, 1968, pp 59–65.

¹⁰ R Body, *Agriculture: the triumph and the shame*, 1982, p 13; D K Britton, 'Is there a case for farm income support?', in Centre for European Agricultural Studies, *Agriculture: the triumph and the shame: an independent assessment*, Centre for Agricultural Strategy, Reading, June, 1983.

¹¹ R H Best, *Land and living space*, 1981.

consistency of the statistical sources, which must now be considered.

II

The *only* comprehensive survey of the size of *farms* in England and Wales was taken at the population censuses of 1851, 1861 and 1871, when householders who returned their main occupation as farmer or grazier were asked to state the size of their farm. They were instructed to exclude upland hill pastures from the area and presumably it was the area in crops and grass only that was returned, although rough grazing in lowland areas may have been included. Some of the returns are those of retired farmers, thus inflating the numbers. J C Morton, however, believed that retired farmers were no more than 2 per cent of the total, although a later study of Huntingdonshire put the figure nearer 12 per cent.¹² More important, only those who regarded farming as their major source of livelihood returned themselves as farmers. Yet it is certain that many small farms whose occupiers had another and more important form of employment were not included, and thus the smaller farms were understated.¹³ The farm sizes of those who regarded themselves as farmers are contained in the enumerators' schedules for 1851, 1861 and 1871. However, comprehensive results at the county and national level were only published for 1851. The General Report printed the number and area for twenty-one size classes in England and Wales as a whole, whilst the *number* but not the *area* of farms in these size classes was published for each registration county.¹⁴ The data collected for the 1861 and 1871 censuses were not published for England and Wales, but in the 1871 census the numbers in each size class for seventeen

counties, all in eastern and southern England, were printed.¹⁵

An *agricultural* census has been held in England and Wales every year since 1866. Among the many items farmers have been required to enter upon a printed census form has been the size of their farm, or more accurately the size of their *agricultural holding*. Forms have gone not to those on a list of farmers but, until 1892, to all *occupiers* of more than ¼ acre of agricultural land and afterwards to occupiers of more than 1 acre. Until the late 1970s occupiers were asked to return only the acreage in crops and grass on their holding; since then not only crops and grass, but the total area, including woodland, rough grazing and all other land. From 1912 to 1975 data on the *number* of holdings in the classes 1-5, 5-50, 50-100, 100-300 and 300 acres and over are available each year, and indeed for more classes in some years. But before 1912 data for these same classes are only available at irregular intervals; 1885 is the first year in which data for all these classes are available. Data on the *area* under crops and grass in each size class are available from the population census of 1851, and from the agricultural censuses of 1885, 1895, 1913, 1915, 1924, 1944 and more regularly since then. The boundaries of the class limits were changed in 1942; prior to 1942 the class limits were from 'over 5 acres to and including 20 acres' etc; after 1942 they were defined as '5 acres and under 20 acres' etc. The classes are referred to here, for convenience, both before and after 1942, as 5-20 acres, 20-50 acres, and so on.¹⁶ Since 1976 the number and area of holdings has been published in size classes measured in hectares, the class limits of which do not correspond — except for the small classes — to the earlier acreage limits, whilst since 1979 data have been published only for total area, not for crops

¹² J C Morton, *Labour*, 1887, p 12; W Ogle, 'The alleged depopulation of the rural districts of England', *JRSS*, 52, 1889, pp 205-32.

¹³ Clapham, *op cit*, 1932, p 263.

¹⁴ 1851 Census Great Britain, Age, Civil Condition, Occupations and Birth Places, Vol 1. Accounts and Papers, Vol 88, part 1, 1852-3.

¹⁵ *Census of England and Wales, 1871. General Report*, Vol 4, 1873, xlii-xlviii.

¹⁶ Ministry of Agriculture, *A Century of Agricultural Statistics: Great Britain 1866-1966*, HMSO, 1967.

and grass. Hence the continuity of the agricultural census data at the national level ends in 1975.

The area included in the size of a farm does present problems. Where data are only available for the area of crops and grass on farms — and this means most years before 1979 — the size of upland farms in Wales, the Pennines and the North Yorkshire Moors may be understated. J T Coppock has used the census figures for 1970, which include rough grazing, to plot the distribution of farm sizes.¹⁷ There is however a further difficulty. In the 1880s, 1890s and 1920s it is possible that some permanent grass was neglected and would subsequently be returned by the farmer as rough grazing; hence the area returned as crops and grass, and thus the size of the farm, would be reduced. Conversely in the period since 1940 it is possible that farmers have upgraded rough grazing, and thus the size of their farm is inflated as a result of redefinition rather than genuine enlargement.¹⁸

There are however more difficult problems in interpreting the trend in farm size. The population census data refer to *farms* but the agricultural census to *holdings* of agricultural land and the two are by no means the same. Many of the smaller agricultural holdings consisted of land not used for agricultural production, but accommodation land for butchers and others, park land, private gardens and other such land. This problem may be partly overcome by eliminating from the analysis all holdings smaller than 5 acres.¹⁹

Perhaps more seriously many English farms are divided into two or more physically distinct holdings, although run as one farm business. Until 1922 occupiers were instructed to return a census form for *each* holding; thereafter, to return *one* form for each *farm*, even if split into several holdings,

although to what extent they complied is unknown. It should also be noted that for the first forty years of the agricultural census, forms were collected by officials of the Customs and Excise, which may have encouraged evasion or inaccurate answers. The Ministry of Agriculture believes that the returns are reasonably accurate from the 1890s although occupiers were not required by law to return a form until 1927.²⁰ Even then some holdings remained undetected. The rationing of animals feeds in 1942 revealed a large number of hitherto unrecorded holdings, for the most part very small.

A third problem is that many of the agricultural holdings were — and are — part-time holdings. A number of surveys had indicated that a large proportion of all the holdings in England and Wales was farmed part-time, but it was not until 1968 that the Ministry of Agriculture attempted to define full-time holdings and to remove part-time holdings from the published tables of holding size.²¹ Some 47,000 statistically insignificant holdings were deleted in 1968 on the grounds that they occupied less than 4 hectares of agricultural land, had no employed workers and needed less than 26 standard man-days of work per year. The thresholds of full-time were raised in 1973, and by 1977 a further 9600 holdings had been excluded. In addition, farmers who had continued to return more than one form for what was a single farm business were instructed to return only one form in future. Hence from 1968 onwards both the total number of holdings and the numbers in the smaller size classes are not directly comparable with the preceding years. The

¹⁷ J T Coppock, *An Agricultural Atlas of England and Wales*, 1976.

¹⁸ B E Cracknell, in discussion of Britton and Ingersent, *op cit*, 1964.

¹⁹ Ministry of Agriculture, *The Agricultural Output of England and Wales 1925*, HMSO, 1927, Cmd 2815.

²⁰ E Thomas, 'Changes in the size of agricultural holdings in England and Wales during the past 100 years with particular attention to small holdings and the problem of small holdings', *Proceedings of the First International Conference of Agricultural Economists*, 1929, pp 139–56.

²¹ Ministry of Agriculture, *National Farm Survey of England and Wales (1941–43), a summary report*, HMSO, 1946; J Ashton and B E Cracknell, 'Agricultural holdings and farm business structure in England and Wales', *Jnl Agric Econ*, 14, 1961, 472–500.

population census data for 1851 in contrast only included occupiers of land for whom farming was their main source of livelihood.²²

Hence there are clearly considerable problems in interpreting the trend in the size of farms; indeed for most of the period it is only *holdings* that can be traced. But, as already noted, the way in which trends are measured can lead to differing interpretations of change. These are now considered.

III

The total number of holdings of over 5 acres rose slightly from 1870 to 1915 (Table 1) and then declined by 27 per cent to 1966, by 46 per cent to 1975; but much of the decline between 1966 and 1975 was due to the exclusion of holdings — 47,000 — which were defined as statistically insignificant in 1968. Three-quarters of the fall in the total number of holdings was accounted for by holdings of 5–50 acres. Some of the decline may be attributed to the return, after 1922, of one form for several holdings, rather than a form for each holding. More important, the total area in crops and grass fell by over 2½ million acres between 1915 and 1966 due largely to the conversion of farmland to urban uses. As much of this conversion was near towns, where farms are smaller than the national average,²³ some of the decline in numbers can be attributed to the elimination of holdings rather than the amalgamation of small holdings into larger units.

The mean size of agricultural holdings over 5 acres was remarkably constant from 1885 to 1951, with a slight decline to 1925 and increase thereafter (Table 1). After 1951 there was an undoubted increase, although between 1966 and 1983 much of this was due to the exclusion of statistically insignificant holdings from the published data and the inclusion of rough grazing in

TABLE 1
Total number of holdings over 5 acres,¹
England and Wales, 1870–1983

Date	Number	Area ² (000 acres)	Average size (acres)
1870	336,497		
1885	338,715	27,378	81
1895	342,649	27,382	80
1915	342,710	26,773	78
1925	330,425	25,636	78
1935	312,503	24,757	(79) ³
1944	295,247	24,136	82
1951	296,332	24,251	82
1960	273,135	24,254	88
1966	248,636	24,154	97
1975 ⁴	186,116	23,536	126
1983	173,336	26,921 ⁵	155

¹ From 1942 'of 5 acres and over'.

² Crops and grass on holdings of 5 acres and over.

³ There are no figures for the area on holdings over 5 acres for 1935. An estimate for the area of holdings of 1 to 5 acres has been deducted from the total area in crops and grass.

⁴ Statistically insignificant holdings were excluded from the tables after 1968.

⁵ Total farm area on all statistically significant holdings.

Sources: Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *The Agricultural Output of England and Wales 1925*, HMSO 1927, Cmd 2815; Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, *A Century of Agricultural Statistics, Great Britain, 1866–1966*, HMSO, 1968; *Agricultural Statistics, Great Britain, 1866–1966*, HMSO, 1968; *Agricultural Statistics, England and Wales 1975*, HMSO, 1976; *Agricultural Statistics, United Kingdom, 1983*, HMSO, 1984.

the area in holdings in the figure for 1983. In addition it should be noted that Acts of 1957 and 1967 attempted to accelerate the demise of small, uneconomic holdings by paying part of the costs of amalgamation and offering annuities to farmers who retired. They do not seem to have had a marked impact.²⁴ The figures for mean size of holding confirm the impression of stability from the late nineteenth century

²² Ministry of Agriculture, *The changing structure of agriculture 1968–1975, 1977; Agricultural Statistics 1978–9 England*, HMSO, 1981.

²³ P G Craigie, 'The size and distribution of agricultural holdings in England and abroad', *JRSS*, 50, 1987, pp 86–149.

²⁴ Robson, *op cit*, 1970.

until 1951 which has been noted by many writers.

From the 1880s the number of holdings of 5-20 acres has been in continuous decline (Fig 1). But of the classes over 20 acres,

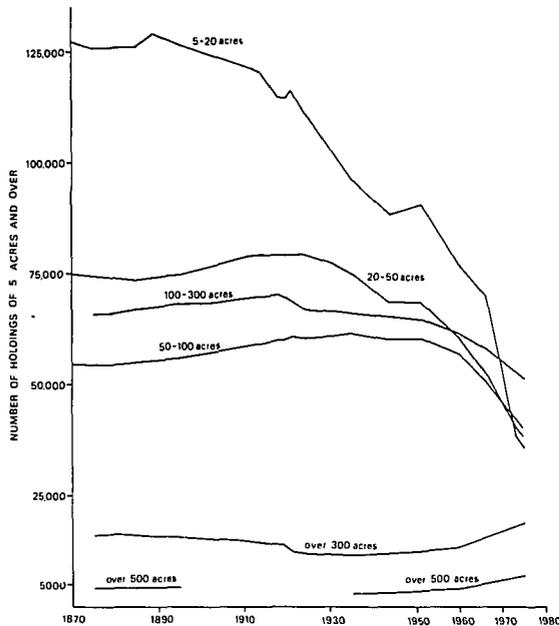


FIGURE 1
Changes in the number of holdings in each size class, 1870-1975

those beneath 300 acres *increased* from the 1880s until the 1920s and then declined, whilst in contrast the number of holdings over 300 acres declined until the 1920s and thereafter increased. It is possible that some of this latter change is due to changes in the definition of rough grazing by farmers. But it must also be recalled that there was a marked fall in the area of crops and grass over this period (Table 2A). Hence the percentage of the number of holdings in each size class may be a better indicator of change (Table 2B). The relative importance of small, medium and large holdings, by numbers, changed little between 1885 and 1960; it is possible to extend this comparison to 1851 and 1975. Part-time farms were not included in the population census data of 1851; between 1968 and 1975 the Ministry

of Agriculture excluded a large number of small and part-time holdings, and exhorted farmers with separate holdings to return one form. By 1975 a holding must have been near to being the same as a farm and the two years can thus be compared. In 1851 the proportion of the number of farms in each size class under 300 acres except that of 50-100 acres was slightly less than in 1975 (Table 3a). Each size class over 300 acres was slightly more. But the differences are small and it is possible to claim that there was little change in the *relative importance* of each size class by *numbers* between 1851 and 1975 (Table 3a).

Large changes in the *number* of small holdings may have little effect on the *area* occupied by the size classes. Conversely, comparatively small changes in the number of large holdings may influence the area in that class very substantially. Hence trends in farm size may be usefully analysed by considering the *area* occupied by each size class. In Fig 2 the major changes are the slow increase in the area occupied by medium-sized farms (100-300 acres) until

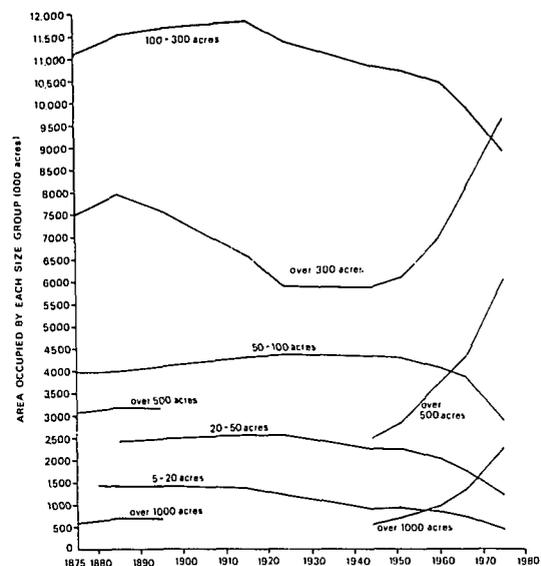


FIGURE 2
Changes in the area in crops and grass occupied by holdings in each size class 1875-1975

TABLE 2
England and Wales 1851-1983

A: Area of crops and grass occupied by small, medium and large holdings				
Date	Crops and grass ¹ (000 acres)	Small (5-100 acres)	Medium (100-300 acres)	Large (over 300 acres)
1851	24,660	21.6	44.7	33.7
1885	27,379	28.9	42.1	29.0
1895	27,382	29.5	42.6	27.8
1915	26,773	31.1	44.1	24.7
1924	25,636	32.6	44.3	23.1
1944	24,136	31.0	44.8	24.2
1951	24,251	30.8	44.0	25.2
1960	24,254	28.7	42.9	28.4
1966	24,154	25.6	40.5	33.4
1975	23,537	19.8	37.5	42.7
1983 ²	26,954	14.4	31.8	54.3

B: Number of small, medium and large holdings				
	Total numbers ¹ (000s)	%		
1851	215,615	62.5	29.7	7.8
1870	336,497	76.6	23.4	
1885	338,715	75.3	19.8	4.9
1895	342,649	75.3	19.9	4.8
1915	324,710	75.5	20.3	4.2
1925	330,425	75.7	20.4	3.8
1944	295,247	73.7	22.2	4.1
1951	296,332	73.9	21.8	4.3
1960	273,135	72.0	22.9	5.0
1966	248,636	70.1	23.5	6.4
1975	186,116	62.5	28.0	9.5
1983 ²	185,993	59.6	26.7	13.7

¹ Area and numbers of holdings of 5 acres and over.

² Includes all statistically significant holdings and is of total area; figures for over 300 acres are an estimate.

Sources: 1851 Census, Great Britain. Age, civil condition, occupations, and birth places, Vol 1, Accounts and Papers, Vol 88, pt 1, 1852-3;

Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *The Agricultural Output of England and Wales 1925*, HMSO, 1927, Cmd 2815;

Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, *A Century of Agricultural Statistics, Great Britain, 1866-1966*, HMSO, 1968;

Agricultural Statistics, England and Wales, 1975, HMSO, 1976;

Agricultural Statistics, United Kingdom, 1983, HMSO, 1984.

the First World War and the steady decline thereafter, and the dramatic decline of the larger farms (over 300 acres) from the 1880s to the 1920s and the equally dramatic rise since 1944. The trends in the area occupied by the other smaller classes have been less marked but they have declined since the

1920s. It should be recalled that there was a considerable decline in the total area of crops and grass from the 1880s onward. Hence the relative importance of each size group must be examined (Table 2A). From 1885 until 1924 the percentage of the area occupied by small- and medium-sized farms

TABLE 3
England and Wales 1851 and 1975

Size (acres)	(a) Number of holdings				(b) Area of crops and grass			
	1851	%	1975	%	1851	%	1975	%
5-20	42,315	19.8	36,595	19.7	523,905	2.1	423,973	1.8
20-50	47,829	21.9	38,883	20.9	1,598,945	6.5	1,290,919	5.5
50-100	44,558	20.7	40,780	21.9	3,206,451	13.0	2,945,381	12.5
100-150	29,020	13.5	23,453	12.6	3,627,500	14.7	2,857,112	12.2
150-300	35,133	16.3	28,671	15.4	7,388,275	30.0	5,974,435	25.4
300-500	11,646	5.4	10,646	5.7	4,360,925	17.7	4,029,221	17.1
500-700	3,076	1.4	3,560	1.9	1,802,300	7.3	2,072,021	8.8
700-1000	1,267	0.6	2,031	1.1	1,038,750	4.2	1,669,514	7.0
1000 & over	771	0.4	1,497	0.8	1,123,300	4.5	2,273,678	9.7
	215,615	100	186,116	100	24,660,351	100	23,536,253	100

Sources: 1851 Census, Great Britain. Age, civil condition, occupations and birth places, Vol 1, Accounts and Papers, Vol 88, pt 1, 1852-3;

Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, *Agricultural Statistics, England and Wales, 1975*, HMSO, 1976.

increased, that of large farms declined. Thereafter the area occupied by the former two classes declined, that of the latter rose from less than one-quarter of the area of crops and grass to one-third; the arguments for comparing 1851 and 1975 can also be applied to the data on area. Somewhat surprisingly the *percentage* of the area occupied by the small farms has fallen very little, the medium-sized more substantially, from 44.7 per cent to 37.5 per cent (Table 3b), whilst the larger farms have gained considerably, in contrast to the small changes in the percentage of the *number* of holdings in each class. As can be seen in Table 3b, it is the very big farms, over 500 acres, which have made most of the gain. All classes under 500 acres occupy proportionally less of the area of crops and grass than they did in 1851.

Clearly then, any interpretation of changes in the farm size structure of England and Wales depends upon which measure is used. Because of the great decline in the area in crops and grass since the 1870s, structure as well as the absolute number or area occupied in each class has to be considered. In terms of the relative structure of numbers there was little change between 1885 and

1966, or indeed between 1851 and 1975. But in terms of the area occupied the period is dominated by the decline of the larger farm from the 1880s — and possibly since the 1870s — to the late 1920s and thereafter the rapid growth of farms over 300 acres. Even so it was not until the later 1960s that the proportion of the area occupied by holdings over 300 acres reached one-third, the proportion which had been occupied by such farms in 1851.

IV

There were important regional differences in the trends in the area occupied by small holdings between 1885 and 1924, and between 1924 and 1973.²⁵ As noted already, the area occupied by small farms increased in the first period, but only very slightly (Table 4). Indeed, in many counties in the north of England and in Wales there was an actual decline, and the larger increases were found in the counties of the southern fens and in Wiltshire, Dorset and Hampshire. This may have been due to the more active acquisition of land by county councils to create small holdings under the Acts of

²⁵ The change of county boundaries between 1973 and 1974 prevents the use of later figures.

TABLE 4
Changes in the area of crops and grass occupied by small and large holdings,
England and Wales, 1885-1973

Region	Percentage change in the area occupied by holdings of 300 acres and over			Percentage change in the area occupied by holdings of 5-100 acres		
	1885-1924	1924-73	1885-1973	1885-1924	1924-73	1885-1973
1 East	-16.2	+55.5	+30.7	+11.1	-57.5	-46.9
2 East Central Midlands	-20.8	+74.1	+37.8	+ 4.7	-50.5	-48.1
3 South-east Midlands	-17.8	+54.6	+27.0	+ 5.2	-54.0	-51.6
4 South central	-27.8	+41.5	+ 2.1	+28.8	-41.1	-24.2
5 South-east	-40.0	+88.5	+13.7	+ 7.8	-54.5	-51.0
6 West Midlands	-27.2	+72.9	+25.8	+11.4	-35.0	-27.6
7 North-west	-30.0	+35.2	+35.2	- 5.8	- 5.9	-61.8
8 North	-30.0	+91.7	+33.9	+ 1.4	- 6.0	- 4.8
9 South-west	-47.6	+132.0	+21.6	+17.5	-27.0	-14.6
10 Wales	-44.6	+178.0	+53.8	+ 3.9	-31.0	-28.4
South-west, Wales & North (6-10)	-34.9	+102.3	+31.7	+ 3.3	-36.4	-34.3
East and south (1-5)	-21.2	+45.7	+24.5	+10.5	-86.2	-84.8
England and Wales	-24.4	+66.8	+26.2	+ 5.8	-42.0	-39.1

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, *A Century of Agricultural Statistics Great Britain, 1866-1966*, HMSO, 1968.

1892, 1908, 1916, 1918 and 1926.²⁶ More noteworthy were the spatial variations in the decline of holdings over 300 acres, for although the decline occurred in all counties except Rutland and Huntingdon, the decline was least in the east and south where arable husbandry and large farms predominated in 1885, and greatest in the areas of small farms and livestock production (Table 4) in Wales, the south-west and north-west. This pattern was reversed in the half century after 1924, for although the area occupied by holdings over 300 acres increased in every county except Northumberland the increase was greatest in the west, in the very regions where decline had been greatest in the preceding period (Table 4). Between 1924 and 1973 the decline of the smaller farm was universal, but it was greatest in the east and

south-east, least in most counties in the south and west, Wales, the north-west and the West Midlands.

Although of course there have been great changes in the area occupied by farms of different sizes in the counties of England and Wales, the broad geographical pattern has remained unchanged since mid- and late-Victorian times. In the east and the south — roughly east of the Pennines and south of a line from Rutland to the Bristol Channel and then due south to the English Channel — the large farm was of above average importance; west of this line, in the south-west, Wales, the industrial counties of the midlands and the north-west, the small farm predominated in 1851, and compared with the east and south-east, still does.²⁷

²⁶ J A Venn, *The foundations of agricultural economics*, Cambridge, 1933, pp 110-11, 129-38; E H Whetham, *op cit*, 1978, pp 137-9, 217-19.

²⁷ D Grigg, 'Small and large farms in England and Wales: their size and distribution', *Geography*, 48, 1963, pp 268-79.

V

Since 1975 size classes have been recorded in hectares rather than acres and from 1979 the total area on farms rather than simply the area in crops and grass has been recorded by the Ministry of Agriculture, making it impossible to make direct comparisons of the distribution of farm size before and after 1975. Nonetheless the statistics show a continuing decline in the smaller size groups, and a growth in the larger size groups (Table 5).

has been an increase in the number of holdings which are returned as separate holdings in the census but are run as a single business enterprise. This is due to the increasing number of family partnerships, where, for example, father and son run two physically distinct holdings, or where a landlord has added a formerly tenanted farm to a home farm and run it as a single business, or where companies organize several separate farms as a single financial activity. Thus in a survey of east Norfolk

TABLE 5
Agricultural holdings in England and Wales, 1977 and 1983

	Total	A: Number of holdings				
		Under 19.9 ha	20-39.9 ha	40-99.9 ha	100-199.9 ha	200 ha & over
1977	199,131	84,942	37,463	47,945	19,160	9,621
%	100	42.7	18.8	24.1	9.6	4.8
1983	185,993	76,395	34,434	45,861	19,193	10,110
%	100	41.1	18.5	24.7	10.3	5.4

B: Total area occupied by holdings						
1977	10,968,134	651,159	1,085,277	3,037,281	2,631,006	3,563,410
%	100	5.9	9.9	27.7	24.0	32.5
1983	10,912,625	596,664	1,001,918	2,919,924	2,645,468	3,748,652
%	100	5.5	9.2	26.7	24.2	34.4

Sources: *Agricultural Statistics UK 1980 and 1981*, HMSO, 1982;
Agricultural Statistics UK 1983, HMSO, 1984.

There is no doubt that this is a real trend, and indeed is a continuation of tendencies apparent for some fifty years. However, some qualification is necessary. First, since 1968, and continuing until the present day, holdings which do not meet the Ministry of Agriculture's minimum thresholds for a statistically significant holding have been excluded from the published data on holding size, thus the decline in both the total number of holdings and in particular of the smaller holdings is exaggerated. Conversely some authorities believe that the number of very large farms, particularly those over 700 acres, is understated.²⁸ This is because there

in 1978, 125 separate holdings were identified in the annual census but were run as only fifty-nine businesses.²⁹

VI

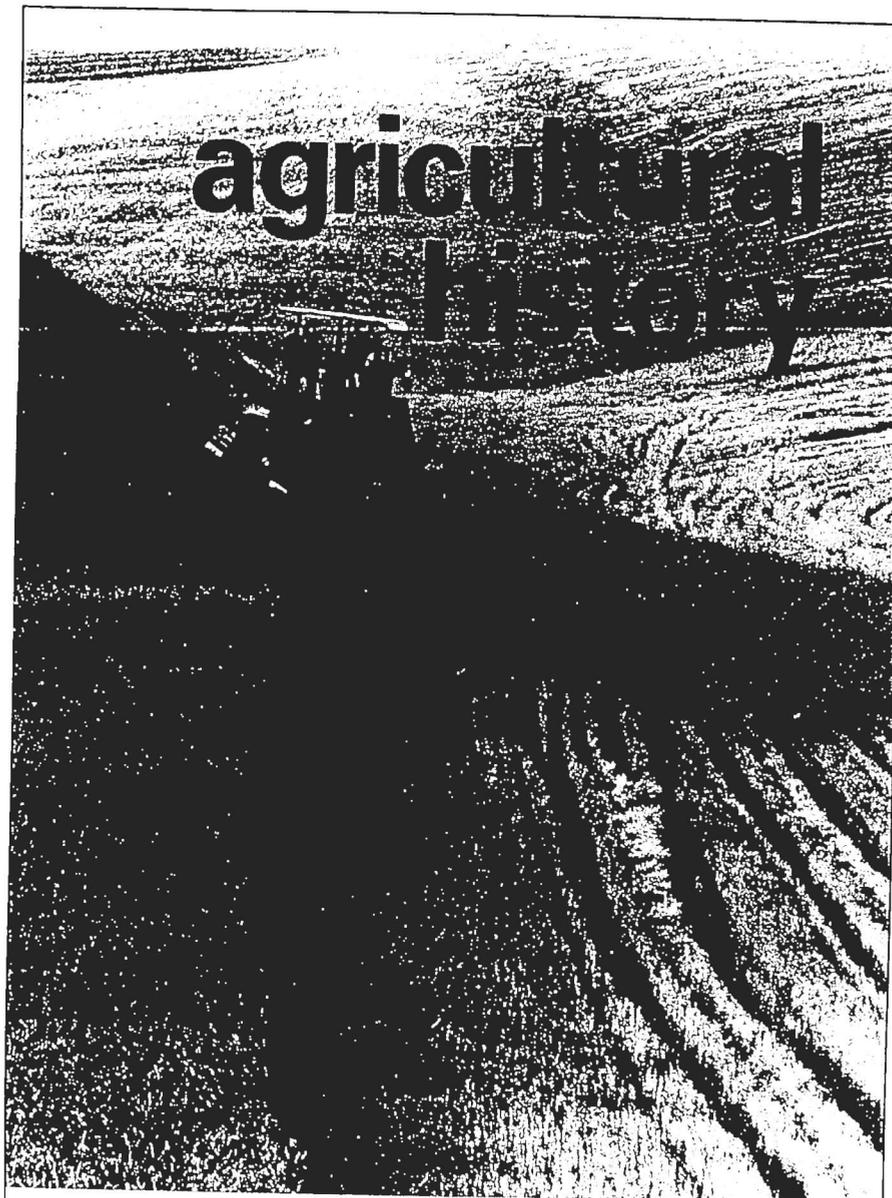
This paper confirms that there was a significant change of direction in farm size change in the 1920s. Before the 1870s the larger farms were increasing at the expense of small farms, but this was reversed in the 1880s, and until the 1920s the smaller farms increased absolutely and proportionally, whilst the larger farms declined. Since then the trends of the earlier nineteenth century

²⁸ *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the acquisition and occupancy of agricultural land*, HMSO, 1979, Cmd 7599 (Chairman, Lord Northfield), p 35.

²⁹ Holderness, *op cit*, 1985, p 128; T K Marsden and D G Symes, 'Landownership and farm organization: evolution and change in a capitalist agricultural region', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 8, 1984, pp 388-99.

have re-established themselves, although it was not until the mid-1960s that farms over 300 acres occupied the same proportion of crops and grass as they had in 1851, whilst as late as 1975 the numerical structure of English farming showed little difference from 1851. Changes in the measurement of farm size and the deletion from the census of statistically insignificant and minor holdings since 1968 makes it difficult to continue the analysis on a consistent basis but there seems

little doubt that the growth of the large farm at the expense of both small- and medium-sized farms continues. In 1983 13 per cent of the holdings accounted for over half the total land occupied by statistically significant holdings in England and Wales. But just as the agricultural holding has never been synonymous with the farm, so it would seem that changing patterns of farm business may soon require yet further changes in definition.



Subscriptions: \$15.00 for individuals; \$25.00 for institutions;
\$8.00 for students. Back issues available for \$7.50. Add \$2.00
for foreign orders.

University of California Press

Periodicals, 2120 Berkeley Way, Berkeley, CA 94720