

‘1846 and All That’: the rise and fall of British wheat protection in the nineteenth century

by Paul Sharp

Abstract:

By documenting the legislative history of the Corn Laws from 1670 and using previously unused data to calculate annual *ad valorem* equivalents (AVE) for most years from 1814, it is possible to establish several important facts about British wheat protection. Statutory protection was only significant for a few years after 1815, the decline starting in the 1820s and continuing beyond the famous ‘repeal’ in 1846. The level of protection prior to 1846 was, for many years, much lower than previous accounts have suggested. In fact, from 1828 the Corn Laws were specifically designed to allow grain to enter Britain at low levels of duty, and prohibitive duties were the exception rather than the norm.

The Corn Laws and their repeal play a central role in any account of nineteenth-century trade policy. As is well known, the Corn Laws after 1815 were an attempt to maintain the protection farmers had enjoyed during the French and Napoleonic Wars. There is no question that the tariffs succeeded in keeping domestic prices higher than they otherwise would have been, and British prices before repeal were consistently higher than those in Prussia, the main European source of British imports.¹ Using the information recorded in British parliamentary papers, this article questions some of the conventional wisdom regarding the significance of individual reforms of the Corn Laws, and the general level of protection afforded by them.

Traditionalist accounts suggest that 1846 was a dramatic break with the past, but this is not really true.² British grain protection was significant for just a few years after 1815 and the movement towards free trade was a gradual process, starting in the 1820s and only ending in 1869. 1846 was just one stage, albeit an important one, in this. This article also questions the validity of previous attempts to quantify the economic significance of the Corn Laws through calculations of their *ad valorem* equivalence. Figures such as a 54 per cent *ad valorem* equivalent

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¹ See the following: P. Bairoch, ‘European trade policy, 1815–1914’, in P. Mathias and S. Pollard (eds), *The Cambridge economic history of Europe* (8 vols, 1941–89), VII, pp. 1–160; R. Perren, ‘Markets and marketing’, in

G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, VI, 1750–1850 (1989), pp. 190–274.

² See for example C. Schonhardt-Bailey, *From the Corn Laws to free trade* (2006).

for the pre-1842 system are widely cited³, but do not reflect the fact that the protection afforded by the Corn Laws varied a great deal over time. This was indeed the point, since they were explicitly designed to allow grain in during periods of scarcity. Moreover, to enjoy lower rates of duty, traders were able to exploit the system.

The paper is structured as follows. Section I documents the legislative history of the Corn Laws from the seventeenth century. Section II first gives a critical summary of previous attempts to assess the incidence of the Corn Laws in the nineteenth century, and then provides an alternative account based on previously unused data from British parliamentary papers. In particular, this is done by compiling an annual time series of *ad valorem* equivalents (AVEs) from 1828, which gives an impression of the rise and fall of British wheat protection after this date. Section III tests the robustness of these findings, and suggests some implications of them. Section IV concludes.

I

The general history of the Corn Laws and their day-to-day functioning is well covered by existing literature⁴, but a short overview may be helpful.

After the repeal of an old and inoperative law of 1463, there was no statutory restriction on importation until the Corn Law of 1660.⁵ From 1670 until 1815 there was little change in the basic format of the laws governing imports. Price bands were specified within which certain duties would be payable. A common feature after 1670 was a very small ‘nominal’ duty payable when the price of wheat was high (normally about 1s. per quarter), and a ‘pivot level’ below which duties were very high. These bands and duties were adjusted at various times, and extra levels, above and below the aforementioned, were sometimes in effect, but in practice they had little impact on imports – which were very low – and at times of scarcity they were suspended. The importance of the duties was as a counterpart to the system of export bounties.⁶ Without the wheat duty, it would have been profitable to import in order to re-export and collect the bounty.⁷

Although the import restrictions began to have a larger practical relevance from the late 1780s – when a combination of the effects of the industrial revolution and population growth led to England becoming a net importer of wheat on a permanent basis⁸ – almost constant wars with France from 1792 until Waterloo in 1815 meant that the Corn Laws became irrelevant, as prices rose to such a level that only the (very small) lowest rate of duty was payable for most of the time. In sum, the period to 1815 was one of ‘practically free’ trade in corn, as stated in the report of an 1821 parliamentary select committee.⁹

³ J. G. Williamson, ‘The impact of the Corn Laws just prior to repeal’, *Explorations in Economic Hist.* 27 (1990), pp. 123–56.

⁴ See the following: J. S. Nicholson, *The history of the English Corn Laws* (1904); D. G. Barnes, *A history of the English Corn Laws from 1660–1846* (1930); C. R. Fay, *The Corn Laws and social England* (1932); W. Vamplew, ‘The protection of English cereal producers: the Corn Laws

reassessed’, *EcHR* 33 (1980), pp. 382–95.

⁵ Barnes, ‘English Corn Laws’, p. 6.

⁶ Although these were rarely payable after 1773 (Fay, ‘Corn Laws’, p. 31), and they were abolished in 1814.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

With peace in 1815 a new law was passed which prohibited wheat imports when prices were below 82s. 6d. per quarter and admitted wheat free of duty above this level. This was a radical departure from previous Corn Laws. Fay has described the 1815 law as ‘the one and only serious breach in corn-law policy from beginning to end’ and ‘defiantly protective’.¹⁰ Barnes has suggested that it reflected a new antagonism between the classes after the French Revolution. With one notable exception from November 1816 to November 1817, ports were closed from the passing of the act until 1825, with the exception of a few months in 1818 and 1819.¹¹ However, although the UK turned protectionist in 1815, this was immediately met by protests, including a formal protest in the House of Lords, signed by eleven peers including two royal dukes, and this opposition continued, amongst other things resulting in the famous ‘Petition of the London Merchants’ of 1820 drafted by Tooke.¹²

New legislation followed the protests. Protection was ostensibly relaxed by a new act in 1822, but this was only to come into operation ‘as soon as wheat should be again admissible for consumption, under the act of 1815’.¹³ Since these terms were never met (except for colonial corn), this act never came into force. However, in 1825, 1826 and 1827 a series of temporary acts allowed some wheat to be released from bond for a short period of the year, although these applied only to grain that had been imported prior to the passing of each act.¹⁴ The 1815 act was permanently repealed in 1828 when the import prohibition was dropped in favour of the Duke of Wellington’s ‘sliding scale’ of import duties.

For most of the 1830s domestic harvests were plentiful, prices were low and discussion of the Corn Laws was muted. However, from 1837 prices began to rise and in 1838 the famous Anti-Corn Law League,¹⁵ led by Richard Cobden and John Bright, began to campaign for free trade in grain. In 1842 an attempt was made to ease the degree of protection, but poor harvests and the Irish Potato Famine caused political disarray which finally led to the repeal of 1846, when duties were greatly reduced together with a promise that only a ‘nominal’ registration duty would be payable from 1849.¹⁶

The act of 1828 is complicated and scholars have contradicted each other when discussing it. The present account is based on contemporary parliamentary papers and, for simplicity, it documents the measures concerning foreign wheat only; colonial wheat was given favourable rates until 1849, but was a very small proportion of total imports.

It is important to emphasize that the Corn Laws were not a simple *ad valorem* tariff. From 1828 to 1849, they involved a complicated ‘sliding scale’, whereby certain price ranges would imply a particular duty on ‘wheat entered for home consumption’. This was a throwback to the years prior to 1815, when duties were also payable according to what can be seen as a miniature

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹¹ Fay, ‘Corn Laws’, p. 79.

¹² N. McCord, *Free trade* (1970).

¹³ BPP, 1843, LIII, *Corn. Returns relating to the importation and exportation of corn, foreign and colonial ...*, p. 49.

¹⁴ Schlote states that ‘imports’ (i.e. releasing wheat from bond) were prohibited from 15 May 1825 to 14 July 1828. This is not strictly true. See W. Schlote, *British*

overseas trade from 1700 to the 1930s (1952), p. 112.

¹⁵ It has been suggested that the League’s motives were wider than a simple reaction to the rise in prices. See McCord, *Free trade*.

¹⁶ For a more detailed account of the politics of repeal, see Barnes, ‘English Corn Laws’, and for larger consequences M. Tracy, *Government and agriculture in western Europe, 1880–1988* (1989), pp. 39–40.

sliding scale. The rate of duty payable was recalculated on a weekly basis. Until 1849 there was no import duty on wheat as such; grain could be imported freely, and then placed in bonded warehouses. It was only on release from bond, i.e. entered for home consumption, that the duty was payable.

The price determining the duty was an average of wheat prices recorded for a varying number of 'inspected markets' (varying depending on the act then in force). An average was taken of these prices: this is the 'Gazette' price – so called because it was (and still is) recorded weekly in the *London Gazette*. In determining the price relevant for the duty for each week, the average of the last six weeks' *Gazette* prices was calculated.

The duties payable under the various tariff regimes are shown in Table 1. One point to note about the 1828 Law is the non-linearity of the scale of tariffs. Above 66s. per quarter the duty fell away very rapidly. The table demonstrates clearly the legislative progress towards free trade from 1828. Duties were decreased in 1842, 1846 and 1849. As this table shows, although 1846 is popularly considered to mark the 'repeal' of the Corn Laws, duties on grain survived for many years afterwards. From 26 June 1846 to 31 January 1849, the sliding scale was to continue in a truncated state, although duties were suspended from 26 January 1847 to 1 March 1848.¹⁷ Shortly afterwards, under the terms of the 1846 act, the sliding scale was abolished altogether: from 1 February 1849 a fixed 'nominal registration duty' of 1s. per quarter was in effect.¹⁸ In addition, an act of 1 August 1849 ended the practice of warehousing by making the duty payable on import.¹⁹ With the growing realization, documented by Prest, that the registration duty amounted to a significant tax on the poorest in society, it was finally repealed on 1 June 1869, leading to true free trade in grain, although it was briefly re-imposed in order to pay for the Boer War from 15 April 1902 to 30 June 1903.²⁰ Wheat then remained duty-free until the Wheat Act of May 1932.²¹

II

(a) *Previous estimates*

Quantifying the impact of a tariff usually makes use of *ad valorem* equivalents, i.e. the ratio of the duty payable on a good to its value, or equivalently the revenue collected to the value of imports. Such measures allow the comparison of protectionist measures over time and across products, since actual tariff measures might be formulated in many different ways: they might for example be based on the weight of a good or on its value or indeed both (which as shown above was the case for the Corn Laws until 1849).

¹⁷ Schlote, *British overseas trade* gives the last date as 1 Sept. 1847, but contemporary sources (for example Board of Trade, *Tables of Revenue* (1847)) give the date as 1 Mar. 1848. This seems more likely, given the very small level of tariff revenue reported for 1847, see Table 3, below.

¹⁸ From 1 Sept. 1, 1864 duties were calculated and imports measured based on weight (cwt.) rather than volume (quarters). So technically from this date the

registration duty was 3d. per cwt., but this is approximately the same as 1s. per quarter. Board of Trade, *Annual Statement*, 1864.

¹⁹ J. Prest, 'A large amount or a small? Revenue and the nineteenth-century Corn Laws', *Historical J.* 39 (1996), pp. 467–78

²⁰ Board of Trade, *Annual Statement*, 1903.

²¹ W. Malembaum, *The world wheat economy 1885–1939* (1953), p. 35.

TABLE 1. The Corn Laws, 1828–69.
All prices in shillings per imperial quarter.

Gazette price of at least	Duty payable			
	15 July 1828 to 28 Apr. 1842	29 Apr. 1842 to 25 June 1846	26 June 1846 to 31 Jan. 1849	1 Feb. 1849 to 31 May 1869
73	1	1	4	1
72	2.67	2	4	1
71	6.67	3	4	1
70	10.67	4	4	1
69	13.67	5	4	1
68	16.67	6	4	1
67	18.67	7	4	1
66	20.67	8	4	1
65	21.67	9	4	1
64	22.67	10	4	1
63	23.67	11	4	1
62	24.67	12	4	1
61	25.67	13	4	1
60	26.67	14	4	1
59	27.67	15	4	1
58	28.67	16	4	1
57	29.67	17	4	1
56	30.67	18	4	1
55	31.67	19	4	1
54	32.67	20	4	1
53	33.67	20	4	1
52	34.67	20	5	1
51	35.67	20	6	1
50	36.67	20	7	1
49	37.67	20	8	1
48	38.67	20	9	1
47	39.67	20	10	1
Below 47s.	+1s. for every shilling decrease in price	20s. was the maximum payable	10s. was the maximum payable	Fixed rate of duty

Sources: BPP, 1843, LIII, *Returns relating to the importation and exportation of corn*; Board of Trade, *Tables of Revenue, Population and Commerce of United Kingdom and Dependencies and of some Foreign Countries* (HMSO, 1843–52); Board of Trade, *Annual Statement of Trade and Navigation of United Kingdom with Foreign Countries and British Possessions* (HMSO, 1853–1903).

The most widely cited estimates for the *ad valorem* incidence of the Corn Laws are those of Williamson.²² He attempted to assess the *ad valorem* impact of the Corn Laws after 1815 by first testing whether there was market integration between the UK and Prussia. If markets were well integrated ‘it would be a simple matter to infer the impact of the Corn Laws on home prices by measuring price differentials between British and foreign markets, adjusting for transport costs.’²³

Williamson drew inspiration from Fairlie²⁴, who divided the period 1815–68 into five: 1815–27, 1828–41, 1842–8, 1849–59 and 1860–8. She had a time series with an average yearly price of wheat in England and Wales and an average yearly price of wheat in Prussia. Both were taken from an earlier paper of Fairlie’s, who provided estimates of the ‘amount by which English prices would have been lower had there been free trade’ by making seemingly *ad hoc* assumptions about the level of transport costs and terms of trade effects, i.e. she corrected for the fact that with free trade the Prussian price would have risen, thus offsetting some of the gains in England.²⁵ This number can then be used to give an estimate of the *ad valorem* impact of the tariff in each period.²⁶ Williamson suggested that Fairlie’s calculations assumed too strong a terms of trade assumption (thus implying smaller potential price changes in Britain and a implied tariff that is too low), although Ward found support for Fairlie’s assumption.²⁷

Williamson’s solution was to run a simple regression of the English prices of wheat from 1815–61 on the Prussian prices given in Fairlie.²⁸ Dummies were introduced for the three protectionist regimes, 1815–27, 1828–41 and 1842–5 and finally a trend was introduced ‘to reflect the possibility of changing transport costs or changing market efficiency’.²⁹ Since the dummy coefficients represented the mark-up of English over Prussian prices due to each regime, they could be used to calculate an estimate of the *ad valorem* protection afforded by the various Corn Law regimes.

Comparing these with Fairlie’s calculations without the terms of trade effect (‘Using Williamson’s assumption’), Williamson concluded that ‘[t]he preferred estimates ... are quite close. They imply that the *ad valorem* equivalent tariff rate was about 71 per cent between 1815 and 1827, about 54 per cent between 1828 and 1841, and about 22 per cent between 1842 and 1845.’³⁰ There are a number of problems with Williamson’s analysis; for example, there are some minor questions about the data.³¹ More importantly, however, interpreting his results presents

²² Williamson, ‘Impact’, and see also K. O’Rourke and J. G. Williamson, *Globalization and History* (1999), pp. 38, 83–4 and O’Rourke and Williamson, ‘From Malthus to Ohlin: trade, industrialisation and distribution since 1500’, *J. Economic Growth* 10 (2005), p. 10.

²³ Williamson, ‘Impact’, p. 126.

²⁴ S. Fairlie, ‘The Corn Laws and British wheat production, 1829–76’, *ECHR* 22 (1969), pp. 88–116.

²⁵ S. Fairlie, ‘The nineteenth-century Corn Law reconsidered’, *ECHR* 18 (1965), pp. 562–75.

²⁶ See Williamson, ‘Impact’, p. 128.

²⁷ Williamson, ‘Impact’, p. 128n; T. Ward, ‘The Corn Laws and English wheat prices, 1815–46’, *Atlantic Economic J.* 32 (2004), p. 254.

²⁸ Fairlie, ‘Nineteenth-century Corn Law reconsidered’.

²⁹ Williamson, ‘Impact’, p. 127

³⁰ The figure of 22 per cent is incorrectly cited as 7 per cent in O’Rourke and Williamson, ‘Globalization’, p. 38; Williamson, ‘Impact’, p. 128.

³¹ There is an error in the Prussian series. From 1816 to 1827 this is taken from a contemporary article: R. W. Rawson, ‘On the prices and fluctuations of grain in Prussia and England, from 1816 to 1841’, *J. Statistical Society of London* 5 (1842), pp. 32–46 (1842). The price for 1816 appears to have been transcribed incorrectly by Fairlie (58s. instead of 48s.) and no source is given for 1815. However, even correcting for this, it has not been possible to reproduce Williamson’s estimates using the data he cites. Using the regression, the figures for 1815–27, 1828–41 and 1842–5 respectively, are 74.8 per cent, 59 per cent and 24.8 per cent. Using ‘Williamson’s assumption’, the figures are 63 per cent, 50 per cent and 23 per cent.

difficulties. Williamson found the constant to be insignificant. This means that it is difficult to accept his interpretation as any meaningful 'estimate of transport costs and expenses'. Moreover, the trend is also insignificant, which, using Williamson's interpretation, suggests that 'there is no evidence of significant combined changes in market efficiency and transport costs over time', but the three dummies act much like a trend, and it is surely difficult to separate the effects.

However, there is no escaping the main conclusion from Williamson's regression: that the price gap was narrowing over time, and that successive tariff reductions almost certainly played a large part in this. The main criticism has to be, however, that it fails to provide any information on the swings in the protection from year to year. In fact, of course, the protection varied from week to week, so to state that the 1828 sliding scale was equivalent to a 54 per cent *ad valorem* tariff provides about as much information as quoting the average price for the period. As Capie notes, average rates for long periods must 'be a great simplification'.³²

Is it then possible to use price differentials to create annual estimates? As before, this is possible only if markets are perfectly integrated and although Williamson's regression provides evidence that this was fulfilled on average for the periods he looks at, there is evidence that for some years the tariff was so high that this was not the case. For example, O'Rourke shows that from 1832 to 1837 tariffs were so prohibitive that the Law of One Price did not hold.³³

In addition, the assumption of constant transportation costs is unlikely to be correct – cycles in transport costs are a well-documented phenomenon.³⁴ Persson's data show that the barrier to trade due to transportation costs could easily fluctuate by a factor of two or three from year to year. This could be the reason why Williamson's constant is insignificant in his aforementioned econometric analysis. Even ignoring this, there is still the problem that any estimates based on the Law of One Price must assume *perfect* market integration, i.e. that *all other costs*, except transportation costs, have been arbitrated away. There is nothing to suggest that markets were so efficient at this time.

An obvious and simple way of estimating the impact of the Corn Laws on an annual basis is to use the method employed by Schlote.³⁵ He took the average yearly *Gazette* price of wheat and used the sliding scale to calculate what the tariff would have been at that price. That is

Note 31 *continued*

Even using Williamson's regression coefficient for 1815–27, the estimate is 74.8 per cent rather than 72.8 per cent. This difference, as well as the reported average Prussian price of 34.47s. in his n. 2, suggests that the differences between my results and his stem from discrepancies between his Prussian data for 1815–27 and that given in Fairlie 'Nineteenth-century Corn Law reconsidered'. The difference is of little importance for the results, however.

³² F. Capie, 'Tariff protection and economic performance in the nineteenth century', in J. Black and L. A. Winters (eds), *Policy and performance in*

international trade, (1983).

³³ K. H. O'Rourke, 'The repeal of the Corn Laws and Irish emigration', *Explorations in Economic Hist.* 31 (1994), pp. 120–38; see also O'Rourke and Williamson, 'Globalization', p. 83.

³⁴ See for example D. North, 'Ocean freight rates and economic development, 1750–1913', *JECh* 18 (1958), pp. 537–55; and K. G. Persson, 'Mind the Gap! Transport costs and price convergence in the nineteenth century Atlantic economy', *European Rev. Economic Hist.* 8 (2004), pp. 125–47.

³⁵ Schlote, *British overseas trade*, p. 61.

$$AVE_t = \frac{D_t(P_t)}{P_t}$$

where $D_t(P_t)$ is the duty payable from the relevant sliding scale at time t , which is a function of the price at time t .

He then reported the tariff as a percentage of the price for selected years from 1829 to 1848. Completing his time series gave the picture in Table 2. However, although Schlote's method seems intuitively correct, it tends to hide the true variation in the *ad valorem* incidence of the Corn Laws between his selected years. This is due to the workings of the Corn Laws under the sliding scale, as touched on earlier. Vamplew has shown that wheat was only normally released from the bonded warehouses when tariffs were at their lowest level during a year.³⁶ Indeed, in most cases, over 95 per cent of wheat was released at the lowest level of duty in each period of an up- or down-swing in duties.

Thus, to take one example, during the downswing in duties from week 5 to week 38 in 1838, 1306 quarters of wheat were released for home consumption, 96.6 per cent of this at a rate of 1s. per quarter. From week 39 to week 45 there was an upswing in duties, during which only 166 quarters were released. In the downswing from week 46 to week 13 in 1839 100 per cent of the 996 quarters released for home consumption paid a duty of just 1s. per quarter. Just looking at the average price for 1838 (64s.), as Schlote did, would imply a duty of 22.67s., or 35 per cent of the *Gazette* price. In reality, most wheat paid a duty of just 1s. per quarter: less than 2 per cent of the price.

Thus it is that Schlote's method yields unreliable estimates: very little grain was subject to duty at the highest rates and any estimate using the average price for the year to determine the implied duty will upwardly bias the estimates of the *ad valorem* incidence.

(b) *New annual estimates*

The new estimates presented here are based on the ratios of tariff revenue to import values, and thus have the advantage that they do not rely on an assumption of market integration or on trade with specific countries. It is thus also possible to use this method to present annual estimates which more accurately reflect the proportion of the price paid in duty than Schlote's method.

This is a commonly used approach, for example by Imlah and more recently by Nye for more general studies of this period.³⁷ It is also the method recommended by Capie, who states that '[d]uties as a percentage of total imports overcome the serious problem of the conversion of specific duties ... to *ad valorem* equivalents. And ... since this was a time when prices of many commodities were falling sharply, they are therefore clearly an improvement on simply looking at legislative changes in protection'.³⁸ In relation to the Corn Laws, we should therefore not necessarily expect to see a fall in the *ad valorem* incidence between the 1828 and 1842

³⁶ Vamplew, 'Protection'.

³⁷ A. H. Imlah, *Economic elements in the Pax Britannica* (1958); J. V. Nye, 'The myth of Free-Trade Britain and Fortress France: tariffs and trade in the nineteenth

century', *JEcH* 51 (1991), pp. 23–46.

³⁸ Capie, 'Tariff protection and economic performance', p. 7

TABLE 2. Schlote and Sharp *ad valorem* equivalents (AVE) compared.

	<i>Gazette price</i> (s./qr.) [A]	<i>Implied duty</i> ^a <i>payable</i> (s.) [B]	<i>Schlote AVE</i> (%) [B/A]	<i>Wheat imports</i> (quarters) [C]	<i>Value of</i> <i>imports</i> (£) [A*C]	<i>Duty collected</i> (£) [D]	<i>Sharp AVE</i> (%) [D/(A*C)]
1828 ^b	60.42	26.67	44	748,750	2,261,849	66,269	3
1829	66.25	20.67	31	1,260,683	4,176,013	587,645	14
1830	64.25	22.67	35	1,494,382	4,800,702	493,146	10
1831	66.33	20.67	31	1,088,797	3,611,178	260,498	7
1832	58.67	28.67	49	166,128	487,308	193,249	40
1833	52.92	34.67	66	1,144	3,027	1,124	37
1834	46.17	40.67	88	264	609	324	53
1835	39.33	47.67	121	48	94	81	86
1836	48.50	38.67	80	972	2,356	969	41
1837	55.83	31.67	57	210,254	586,959	297,545	51
1838	64.58	22.67	35	1,728,453	5,581,462	134,924	2
1839	70.67	10.67	15	2,521,494	8,909,280	631,697	7
1840	66.33	20.67	31	2,020,215	6,700,379	724,106	11
1841	64.33	22.67	35	2,236,153	7,192,959	384,294	5
1842	57.25	15	26	2,625,491	7,515,467	1,107,700	15
1843	50.08	20	40	843,739	2,112,864	601,173	28
1844	51.25	19	37	781,036	2,001,405	671,033	34
1845	50.83	20	39	87,701	222,908	78,344	35
1846	54.67	4	7	1,903,853	5,203,866	398,550	8
1847	69.75	4	6	2,622,086	9,144,525	2,047	0
1848	50.50	7	14	1,818,912	4,592,752	406,935	9
1849 ^b	44.25	1	2	4,450,043	9,845,719	221,441	2
1850 ^c	40.25	1	2	3,682,273	7,410,574	187,712	3
1851	38.50	1	3	3,754,318	7,227,063	190,714	3
1852	40.75	1	2	3,013,864	6,140,747	153,002	2
1853	53.25	1	2	4,840,909	12,888,920	247,569	2
1854	72.42	1	1	3,379,318	12,235,948	173,140	1
1855	74.67	1	1	2,627,273	9,808,485	134,312	1
1856	69.17	1	1	4,011,136	13,871,847	205,401	1
1857	56.33	1	2	3,385,909	9,536,977	173,770	2
1858	44.17	1	2	4,177,500	9,225,313	212,091	2
1859	43.75	1	2	3,940,227	8,619,247	199,814	2
1860	53.25	1	2	5,791,818	15,420,716	294,178	2
1861	55.33	1	2	6,808,182	18,835,970	344,886	2
1862	55.42	1	2	9,325,909	25,840,540	472,998	2

	<i>Gazette price</i> (s./qr.) [A]	<i>Implied duty^a</i> <i>payable (s.)</i> [B]	<i>Schlote AVE</i> (%) [B/A]	<i>Wheat imports</i> (quarters) [C]	<i>Value of</i> <i>imports (£)</i> [A*C]	<i>Duty collected</i> (£) [D]	<i>Sharp AVE</i> (%) [D/(A*C)]
1863	44.75	1	2	5,537,273	12,389,648	280,870	2
1864	40.17	1	2	5,272,045	10,588,025	274,973	3
1865	41.83	1	2	4,764,318	9,965,366	262,098	3
1866	49.92	1	2	5,262,727	13,134,890	289,340	2
1867	64.42	1	2	7,874,091	25,361,134	433,056	2
1868	63.75	1	2	7,418,182	23,645,455	407,548	2
1869	48.17	0	0	8,567,273	20,632,848	133,059	1
1870–1901			0				0
1902	28.08	1	4	18,409,545	25,850,070	789,763	3
1903	26.75	0	0	20,029,773	26,789,821	456,424	2
1904–1931			0				0

Notes:

^a The duty for 1828–41 is calculated using the 1828 sliding scale; that for 1842–5, the 1842 sliding scale; that for 1846–48, the 1846 sliding scale; from 1849 the duty used is 1s. per quarter.

^b From July 15.

^b Until 1849 all figures are based on foreign wheat released from bond.

^c From 1850 all figures are based on total imports.

Sources: BPP, 1849, L, *Grain, flour and meal. Return of wheat, barley and oats ... imported into the United Kingdom ... 1792 to 1848.*

regimes, since prices were falling and this would make it more likely that wheat was paying higher rates of duty.

This approach has also been extensively criticized.³⁹ Objections are, however, mostly directed towards its applicability as a comparative measure of protection between various countries and particularly when it is used as an average over many commodities. As a way of comparing the protection offered between different years for one commodity, it seems reasonable enough. Another common criticism is that it cannot account for prohibitive tariffs – however, wheat was released from bond and imported in every year after 1828.⁴⁰

McCloskey used this method to present three estimates: for 1841 (5.6 per cent), for 1854 (1.5 per cent) and for 1881 (0 per cent). Her estimates were dismissed by Williamson, who noted the sizeable difference between McCloskey's estimate of the average tariff for 1841 (35 per cent) and, for example, that given for wheat – just 5.6 per cent. He explains that since 'the fact that duties on wheat were at their lowest in 1841 ... the atypical low rates in 1841 can be ignored'.⁴¹ This is

³⁹ See for example: D. A. Irwin, 'Free trade and protection in nineteenth-century Britain and France revisited: a comment on Nye', *JECH* 53 (1993), pp. 146–52; A. Estevadeordal, 'Measuring protection in the early twentieth century', *European Rev. Economic Hist.* 1 (1997), pp. 89–125; and a detailed criticism is given by the Board of Trade, *Second Series of Memoranda, Statistical Tables*

and *Charts* (1904), pp. 287–92.

⁴⁰ Capie, 'Tariff protection', p. 7.

⁴¹ D. N. McCloskey, 'Magnanimous Albion: Free Trade and British national income, 1841–81', *Explorations in Economic Hist.* 17 (1980), pp. 303–20; Williamson, 'Impact', p. 128n.

not, however, a general criticism of the method, but rather of taking 1841 as representative of the pre-1842 incidence. If it were possible to extend McCloskey's analysis beyond her three data points, then a fuller picture would emerge.

With data from British parliamentary papers this is in fact possible. The formula is simple enough:

$$\text{AVE}_t = \frac{(\text{Duties collected})_t}{(\text{Value of imports})_t}$$

The duties collected in each year are available in official publications. 'Value of imports', however, presents some special difficulties.

Until 1849 'imports' should be taken to mean foreign wheat released from bond, since colonial wheat was subject to different duties and the duty was only payable when the wheat was released from the warehouse. From 1850, imports can be taken to mean total imports of wheat, both foreign and colonial, since the duty was payable on import, and colonial wheat no longer enjoyed preferential rates of duty.

Data is available on volumes of imports for every year. The difficulty is then how to value it. McCloskey notes that the value of wheat imports is not reported prior to 1854, but this is not entirely accurate.⁴² From 1696 records of overseas trade began to be systematically collected. Goods were valued using 'official values' which were based on the average prices in 1694 – but these are obviously of little use here since prices were undoubtedly rather different by the nineteenth century.⁴³ However, from 1854 the method was changed, so that actual current prices, compiled by experts, were used each year.⁴⁴

The best method for valuing wheat released from bond in the UK is the average domestic price, i.e. the *Gazette* price. This valuation has some other advantages. First, it allows the estimates to be directly comparable with Schlote's, who also used the *Gazette* price in the denominator when calculating his AVEs. Second, this appears to have been the method used for valuing wheat after 1854 and thus makes my estimates consistent with those based on later valuations, as can be seen by comparing the result of multiplying quantities with the *Gazette* price, and the official valuations from 1854.

This may or may not be an appropriate valuation from 1850 when the duty was payable on import. However, an alternative measure will make little difference when calculating the value of the imported wheat relative to duties collected, since the difference between the two alternative evaluations is relatively small in comparison to the volume of imports and the relatively small amount of revenue collected. Besides, with virtual free trade after 1849 and market integration, the *Gazette* price could be expected to be equal to the c.i.f. price of imported wheat, which is presumably the basis for the official valuations.

⁴² She has one observation prior to this for 1841, which seems to have been taken from secondary literature.

⁴³ Schumpeter disputes this common explanation of the official value, and argues that it varied until 1725. This has little importance in the current context, however!

See E. B. Schumpeter, 'English Prices and public finance, 1660–1822', *Rev. Economic Statistics* 20 (1938), pp. 21–37.

⁴⁴ For more detail, see Schlote, *British overseas trade*, section A. These were, confusingly for the modern economist, referred to as 'real values'.

TABLE 3. *Ad valorem* equivalents (AVE) 1814–28 for wheat and wheat flour.

	<i>Gazette price</i> (s. per qtr.) [A]	<i>Quantity admitted</i> (quarters) [B]	<i>Value of 'imports'</i> (£) [A*B]	<i>Duty collected</i> (£) [C]	<i>AVE</i> (%) [C/A*B]
1814	74.33	623,086	2,315,803	31,140	1
1815	65.58	116,382	381,636	9,411	2
1816	78.50	225,260	884,146	0	N/A
1817	96.92	1,023,862	4,961,465	0	N/A
1818	86.25	1,550,606	6,686,988	0	N/A
1819	74.50	115,697	430,971	0	N/A
1820	67.83	1,056	3,582	0	N/A
1821	56.08	0	0	0	N/A
1822	44.58	0	0	0	N/A
1823	53.33	51	136	0	N/A
1824	63.92	914	2,921	0	N/A
1825	68.50	399,297	1,367,592	197,519	14
1826	58.67	287,338	842,858	170,017	20
1827	56.67	519,268	1,471,259	591,821	40
1828	60.42	821,794	2,482,503	67,925	3

Note: Measures in hundredweight have been converted to quarters where necessary at the rate of 4.4 cwt. to the quarter.

Sources: Author's own calculations; W. Schlote, *British overseas trade from 1700 to the 1930s* (1952); BPP, 1843, LIII, *Returns relating to the importation and exportation of corn*; BPP, 1849, L, *Return of wheat, barley and meal*; Board of Trade, *Tables of Revenue, Population and Commerce of United Kingdom and Dependencies and of some Foreign Countries* (HMSO, 1843–52); Board of Trade, *Annual Statement of Trade and Navigation of United Kingdom with Foreign Countries and British Possessions* (HMSO, 1853–1903); Board of Trade, *Second Series of Memoranda, Statistical Tables and Charts* (HMSO, 1904); B. R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British historical statistics* (1953).

This method is unfortunately not particularly helpful before 1828. The amount of duty received for years prior to 1828 is only given on wheat and flour combined in official statistics, and is entirely missing prior to 1814, since the records were destroyed in the Custom House fire of 1814. The information that does survive, and the AVE for each year, is however given in Table 3.

The duty collected in 1815 is presumably for the months prior to the passing of the new law on 23 March. The figures for 1814 and 1815 thus give a flavour of the low level of protection afforded by the Corn Laws during the Napoleonic Wars. From 1815 until the temporary Acts of 1825–7 no duty was collected. Wheat was either entered free of duty or prohibited. It is thus impossible to calculate AVEs for these years. The AVEs for 1825–7 are only applicable for the few months covered by the temporary Acts. Finally, the dramatic impact of 1828 is all too clear. For this period it seems more reasonable to use methods based on price differentials to gain some idea of the level of protection afforded.

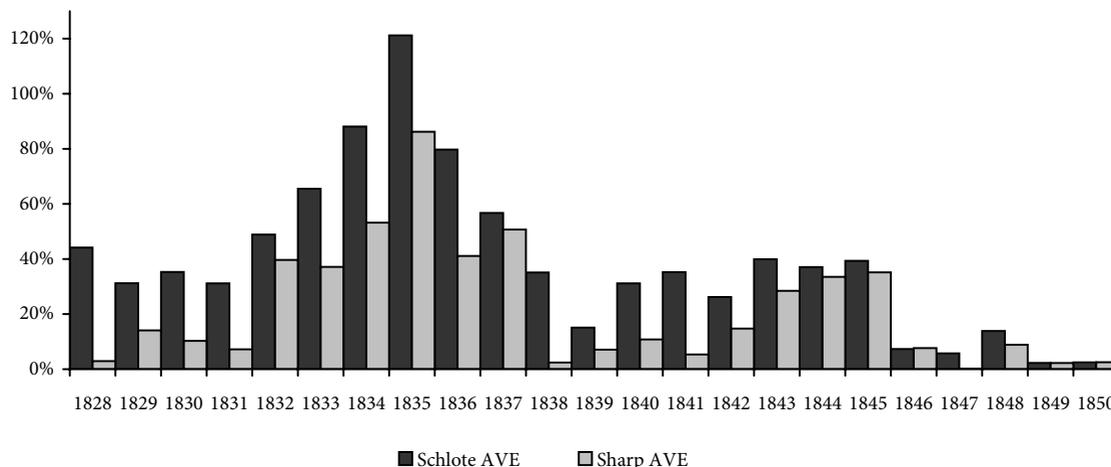


FIGURE 1. Comparison of Schlote's and Sharp's *ad valorem* estimates (AVEs), 1828–50.

Sources: Author's own calculations; Schlote, *British overseas trade*; BPP, 1843, LIII, *Returns relating to the importation and exportation of corn*; BPP, 1849, L, *Return of wheat, barley and meal*; Board of Trade, *Tables of Revenue, Population and Commerce of United Kingdom and Dependencies and of some Foreign Countries* (HMSO, 1843–52); Board of Trade, *Annual Statement of Trade and Navigation of United Kingdom with Foreign Countries and British Possessions* (HMSO, 1853–1903); Board of Trade, *Second Series of Memoranda, Statistical Tables and Charts* (HMSO, 1904); Mitchell and Deane, *Abstract*.

From 1828, the estimates of the annual *ad valorem* equivalents of the duties on wheat are constructed as below, where P_t is as usual the *Gazette* price in year t .

1828–1849:

$$\text{AVE} = \frac{(\text{Duties collected})_t}{(\text{Quantity released from bond})_t * P_t}$$

where all values are for foreign wheat only.

1850–:

$$\text{AVE} = \frac{(\text{Duties collected})_t}{(\text{Quantity imported})_t * P_t}$$

where all values are for *both* foreign and colonial wheat.

The results of these calculations are given in Figure 1, where they are compared to the Schlote estimates. The periods of highest tariffs are unsurprisingly similar in both series. However, my estimates are consistently lower (since Schlote did not allow for the fact that grain was normally only released during the weeks of the year with lowest duty payable), and the difference between the highest and lowest *ad valorem* rates is exaggerated. It should be noted that the figure for 1828 is only for the period after the introduction of the Duke of Wellington's sliding scale,

i.e. from 15 July. Note also that the years of least protection before 'repeal' were in 1828, 1838 and 1841 as stated in contemporary sources.⁴⁵

III

In the following, the term 'level of protection' is used almost interchangeably with the levels of the AVEs. As such, the AVEs are interpreted as representing the ease with which foreign wheat was able to enter the British market and should thus be a reflection of decisions of importers. It is however the case that the protectionist *regime* was constant over the periods covered by the various Corn Laws. It was of course the intention of policymakers that wheat should be able to enter the country at times of scarcity. Since these were equated with periods with high prices, then the protection (using my definition) afforded by the Corn Laws fluctuated with prices, although the protectionist regime was constant over time.⁴⁶ The change in 1842 must, in this interpretation, have led to a less protectionist regime. However, it could have led to greater protection if, at the same time, it ushered in a period of higher prices.

The discussion of the legislative history in section II has demonstrated the movement away from protection after 1828. The annual AVEs can also be used to illustrate this, but present a rather different picture than the estimates of other scholars. This is shown in Table 4, where the averages for each of the three sliding-scale regimes are given.

Initially, the most striking fact about these numbers is the variation between them. The differences between Schlote's and the present author's estimates have already been explained. These are also directly comparable. Fairlie's and Williamson's estimates are also directly comparable, and the difference is due to Fairlie's large terms-of-trade effect.

The difference between Sharp's and Williamson's estimates will be accounted for by non-tariff barriers. Indeed, the workings of the Corn Laws themselves acted as a sort of non-tariff barrier, since the uncertainty surrounding the duties payable on wheat in the medium term and the costs of warehousing wheat in bond would certainly have added to the direct measures of protection detailed above.

An interesting conclusion to be drawn from the regime averages of the annual AVEs is that, even excluding 1828, it turns out that the average *ad valorem* impact of the Corn Laws did not fall after 1842 and in fact remained constant. Although scholars have hitherto assumed that the reduction in the duties payable must have given rise to a fall in protection, a fall in the domestic price of wheat meant that 1842 actually inaugurated a short period of high protection, compared to other years since 1838. This previously undocumented fact has important implications for historians of British politics: it sheds light on the urgency surrounding the debate on the repeal of the Corn Laws after 1842, despite the reform of the sliding scale. Contemporaries were clearly aware of the high level of protection at the time, despite the reform.

For the true value of the annual AVEs, however, it is necessary to look beyond the regime averages. For the first time, the variation in the protection afforded by the Corn Laws from year to year, as recognized by Vamplew, has been documented. It turns out that the statutory

⁴⁵ Williamson, 'Impact', p. 128n.

⁴⁶ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for making this point.

TABLE 4. Summary of previous estimates of the *ad valorem* equivalents of the Corn Law regimes (%).

	<i>Fairlie</i> ^a	<i>Williamson</i>	<i>Schlote</i>	<i>Sharp</i>
1828/9–41	20	54	51	28 ^b
1842–45	10 ^c	22	36	28
1846–48	4	N/A	9	6

Notes:

^a These have been recalculated using the relevant periods.

^b The average for the first regime for this AVE is calculated without the level for 1828, since this was only for part of a year.

^c The sizeable difference of 7.4 per cent between this estimate and that reported by Williamson is because he used the figures reported by Fairlie for the period 1842–8, which includes years after the 'Repeal'.

Sources: S. Fairlie, 'The Corn Laws and British wheat production, 1829–76', *ECHR* 22 (1969), pp. 88–116; J. G. Williamson, 'The impact of the Corn Laws just prior to repeal', *Explorations in Economic Hist.* 27 (1990), pp. 123–56; Schlote, *British overseas trade*.

protection varied quite substantially from year to year, reinforcing the point that any attempt to give an estimate for the whole period of a tariff regime is a gross oversimplification. For the same reason, a case could be made for saying that estimates based on yearly averages are also unsatisfactory, since duties varied on a weekly basis.

However, an annual series is perhaps the most detailed that has practical utility when estimating the impact on imports. Traders might be able to respond to the weekly level of the tariff (or at least the expected level), but they could not necessarily rely on a supply: farmers need much longer to form supply decisions. The only real test of the relevance of the annual AVEs is to compare them to the volume of foreign imports for each year, i.e. *not* the levels of wheat being released from bond (which more or less automatically followed the duty payable). Vamplew noted that 'imports did not respond as strongly as bonded corn to either domestic prices or duties. Although imports peaked at the times of lowest duties, there was a flow of wheat into the bonded warehouses throughout the year'.⁴⁷ However, the new estimates fit in remarkably well with the data on levels of foreign imports after 1828 as illustrated in Figure 2. Note also that the price of Prussian wheat (the main supplier) was always lower than that of UK wheat (even adjusting for transportation costs, see Figure 3 below), so years of little-to-no imports can fairly be taken to illustrate protection in the sense defined above.

The evidence for the importance of the AVEs for import decisions is striking.⁴⁸ First, it is difficult to imagine, had the 1828 regime really been equivalent to a flat 54 per cent tariff rate, that imports would have reached the levels they did in the late 1830s and early 1840s (and to a lesser extent from 1829–31) – levels comparable to those in the years immediately following repeal. Also, if we are prepared to accept Vamplew's well-documented assertion that grain merchants waited for periods of low duties before releasing their grain from bond, then it is not such a great leap of faith to believe that foreign grain exporters waited for years of low

⁴⁷ Vamplew, 'Protection', p. 385.

⁴⁸ Within an ADL framework, the PC Give test of no co-integration of the two series is rejected with a t-value of -5.101 (calculated using OxPack 3.40 for GiveWin 2).

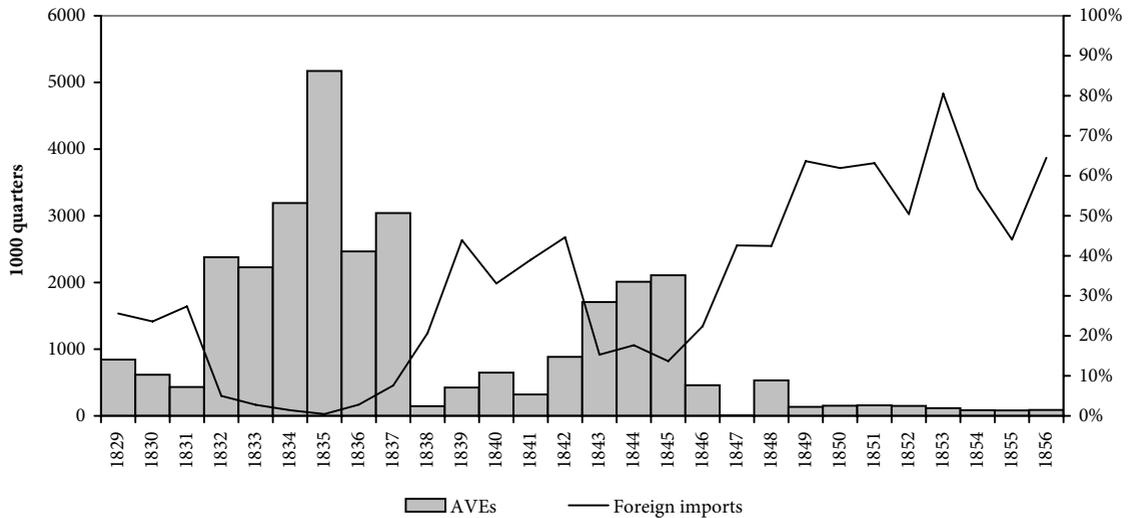


FIGURE 2. Imports of foreign wheat and *ad valorem* estimates (AVEs), 1829–56.

Note: Measures in hundredweight have been converted to quarters where necessary at the rate of 4.4 cwt. to the quarter.

Sources: Author's own calculations; BPP, 1843, LIII *Returns relating to the importation and exportation of corn*; BPP, 1849, L, *Return of wheat, barley and meal*; Board of Trade, *Tables of Revenue, Population and Commerce of United Kingdom and Dependencies and of some Foreign Countries* (HMSO, 1843–52); Board of Trade, *Annual Statement of Trade and Navigation of United Kingdom with Foreign Countries and British Possessions* (HMSO, 1853–1903); Board of Trade, *Second Series of Memoranda, Statistical Tables and Charts* (HMSO, 1904); Mitchell and Deane, *Abstract*.

protection before sending grain to Britain. In fact, Vamplew noted that the official six-week average, together with time-lags in the regulatory process, meant that the duty was predictable: 'A knowledge of market trends, which those involved in the corn trade should have had, ought to have made the prediction of the duty a fairly straightforward task. Holders and potential holders of foreign corn would thus be in a position to take action, if necessary, before the duty actually changed.'⁴⁹ It would thus be possible to arrange shipments of wheat to the UK in anticipation of a period of low duties.

The graph also seems to present a solution to the seeming puzzle as to why O'Rourke and Williamson, when assessing the importance of trade policy for the timing of a structural break in the relationship between English commodity prices and English endowments, i.e. England's change from a closed to an open economy, find 1838 to be the most likely candidate.⁵⁰ Figure 2 makes clear that this year marks the end of significant wheat protection due to the Corn Laws, except for three years. Indeed, it is possible to see the tariff protection as prohibitive from 1815 until 1837 (with the exception of half of 1828, 1829, 1830 and 1831) and low from 1838 (with the exception of just three years – 1843, 1844 and 1845). O'Rourke and Williamson note that 1838 also saw the start of the decline in the Harley freight index and the UK–US grain price gap.

⁴⁹ Vamplew, 'Protection', p. 384.

⁵⁰ K. H. O'Rourke and J.G. Williamson, 'From Malthus

to Ohlin: trade, industrialisation and distribution since 1500', *J. Economic Growth* 10 (2005), p. 14.

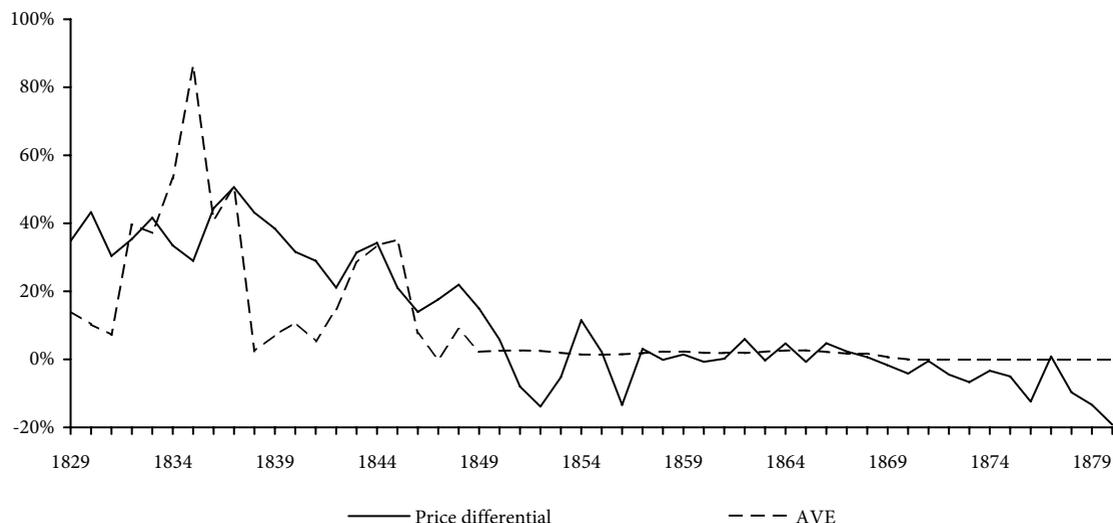


FIGURE 3. Transport cost-adjusted price gap between Königsberg and the UK as a percentage of the UK price and *ad valorem* estimates (AVEs), 1829–79.

Sources: Author's own calculations; A. Jacobs and H. Richter, *Die Großhandelspreise in Deutschland von 1792 bis 1934* (Sonderhefte des Instituts für Konjunkturforschung, 37, 1934), pp. 52–3.

Of course the 1846 repeal was important, since it meant that the level of protection stayed permanently low, but the real break came in 1838 and imports clearly responded to that.

Emphasizing this point should not, however, detract from the larger political and social significance of repeal, which went far beyond the actual levels of protection. This event certainly had a lasting impact on the politics and constitution of Britain. Moreover, without repeal and thus a continuation of the sliding scale in some form, and even perhaps with adjustments to take account of deflation, the movement of English prices towards the lower levels enjoyed by continental Europe during the late nineteenth century, in particular with the 'Grain Invasion' from America, and the consequent high tariffs would have muted the increases in real wages and boosted the rents to landowners with potentially considerable distributional effects.⁵¹

The AVEs would, of course, also be expected to have an impact on price gaps between the UK and export markets. As discussed above, price gaps are not a reliable measure of protectionism, and in addition price gaps can disguise many factors, such as quality differences, which might also change over time. Nevertheless, Figure 3 presents price gaps between the British *Gazette* price and Königsberg (present day Kaliningrad), at this time a major export port for Prussian grain.

The Königsberg prices are taken from Jacobs and Richter and are converted from marks per 1000 kg to shillings per quarter using the assumption that 1 quarter of wheat equals 4.4 wt.⁵²

⁵¹ See the analysis in K. H. O'Rourke, 'The European grain invasion, 1870–1913', *JECH* 57 (1997), pp. 775–801.

⁵² A. Jacobs and H. Richter, *Die Großhandelspreise in*

Deutschland von 1792 bis 1934 (Sonderhefte des Instituts für Konjunkturforschung, 37, 1934), pp. 52–3.

The exchange rates are from Schneider and Schwarzer and Schneider, Schwarzer and Zellfelder.⁵³ The usual estimate of 7.5s. has been subtracted from the price gaps to allow for transportation costs, and the price gap is expressed as a percentage of the UK price in order to allow comparison with the AVE measure.

The similarities between the two series are remarkable. Importantly, the fall in protectionism after 1837 is apparent, as is the spike in protection despite the 1842 reform – the two most important conclusions from above. There is some evidence to suggest that the price gap does not respond immediately to a fall in protection. This could well be to do with transportation costs, which might be expected to increase with booms in trade. In reality, 7.5s. is probably an underestimate for such periods. This seems to be confirmed by looking at the price gap between Hamburg and Königsberg using the data in Jacobs and Richter.⁵⁴ This might be expected to be a good indicator of Baltic transportation costs, and does indeed spike in 1839 and 1847.

As is to be expected, the almost prohibitive tariffs of the mid-1830s are not reflected in the price gap. At this time, local supply and demand would have determined English prices. Moreover, of the small amounts of wheat imported at this time, only a relatively small amount came from Prussia, with a larger proportion coming from colonial suppliers.⁵⁵ Germany ceased being a major supplier of the UK market and became progressively more protectionist from 1879, thus accounting for the late divergence of prices. Otherwise, the correspondence between the AVEs and the price gap is clear.

In summary, it seems that the AVEs accurately reflect the rise and fall of wheat protection after 1828. They thus have an important role to play in analyses of the nineteenth century. The famous contention that the nineteenth-century political debate about the Corn Laws was ‘much ado about nothing’,⁵⁶ a claim largely based on the fact that the ‘repeal’ did not immediately lead to reduced cereal acreage in Britain can now be tested using annual data.⁵⁷ Looking at imports, it seems that the level of protection was very important. At times of low duties imports reached levels not unlike those seen immediately after repeal, although numerous other factors certainly also played a role. The impact of the Corn Laws on market integration can perhaps also now be analyzed. Definitive answers must await formal econometric testing. My estimates support the work of Capie, who concludes for a more general survey of protection and import ratios, that ‘protection was not as high or not as effective as usually supposed’, which is also the natural conclusion to be drawn from the work of Vamplew.⁵⁸

⁵³ J. Schneider and O. Schwarzer, *Quellen und Forschungen zur Historischen Statistik von Deutschland*, XI, *Statistik der Geld- und Wechselkurse in Deutschland (1815–1913)* (1990); J. Schneider, O. Schwarzer and F. Zellfelder (eds), *Währungen der Welt*, I, *Europäische und nordamerikanische Devisenkurse, 1777–1914* (iii), (1991).

⁵⁴ Jacobs and Richter, *Großhandelspreise*, pp. 52–3

⁵⁵ As shown in the BPP cited earlier.

⁵⁶ B. Kemp, ‘Reflections on the repeal of the Corn Laws’, *Victorian Stud.* 5 (1962), p. 189.

⁵⁷ See the discussion in Williamson, ‘Impact’, p. 129.

⁵⁸ Capie, ‘Tariff’, p. 9.

IV

Through an analysis of the legislation and estimates of the *ad valorem* incidence, it is possible to establish several facts about British wheat protection under the Corn Laws. First, prohibitive tariffs were a nineteenth-century phenomenon, and statutory protection was in fact only significant for about twenty years after Waterloo. Second, the incidence of the Corn Laws after 1828 was, for most years, not as high as has previously been suggested. However, some of the years of highest protection occurred after the passing of the reformed sliding scale in 1842, a point that has not previously been appreciated. Third, Britain's legislative movement towards free trade in wheat should be dated from the 1820s rather than the 1840s. Fourth, and related to the previous point, the famous repeal of 1846 marked neither the beginning nor the end of Britain's progress towards free trade in grain.

The movement away from the protection of 1815 was gradual, starting with the temporary laws from 1825–7, and it was most importantly and permanently reversed in 1828. There is a long-running debate about whether or not Britain led the way to free trade.⁵⁹ Although this paper cannot attempt to resolve this, since this would require a far more general survey, it does provide some interesting evidence as far as the important trade in wheat is concerned. Here Britain set the example in the 1820s, not the 1840s.⁶⁰ In the context of previous history, the 'repeal' in 1846 seems less important, and simply another step in a progress towards free trade after the reversal of 1815. Indeed, 1846 did not even mark the end of British wheat protection, but as Britain became increasingly industrial and urban, a return to protection became ever more unlikely and true free trade thus arrived in 1869.⁶¹ The 'traditional' argument about Britain's leading role in the movement to free trade and thus potentially serving as an inspiration for other countries might therefore have more validity than recent accounts suggest.⁶²

By focussing on 1846, historians have tended to ignore the legislative progress towards free trade before and after that date. This is mirrored by a fascination with the Anti-Corn Law League, an organization which was first founded in 1838, by which time the British market was already open! We should not forget that, amongst the peaceful protestors demonstrating for parliamentary reform, who were attacked by the British military in the famous Peterloo Massacre of 1819, were some holding banners proclaiming 'No Corn Laws'. At this time Cobden was just a boy of 15.

⁵⁹ See the contributions in J. Dormois and P. Lains, *Classical trade protectionism, 1815–1914* (2006).

⁶⁰ This was not only in terms of grain. Britain's nineteenth-century commitment to a process of trade liberalization can be dated to at least 1820, when parliament, which at that time included David Ricardo as an MP, declared that future commercial policy should be guided by the principle of free trade (W. D. Grampp, 'How Britain turned to free trade', *Business History Rev.* 61 (1987), pp. 86–112). In fact, by the 1840s 'the Corn Laws stood out as the major remaining bastion of Protection, while tariffs on other imports had been very

substantially diminished' (McCord, *Free Trade*, p. 10).

⁶¹ E. J. T. Collins, 'Food Supplies and Food Policy', in Collins (ed), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, VII, (2 vols, 2000), i, pp. 33–71.

⁶² I call this the traditional argument after Irwin, who characterizes it as such. However, many so-called traditionalists would not subscribe to the idea that repeal sparked an international following, so in this sense Irwin characterizes the traditionalist argument rather too crudely. Again, I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this point.