

RURAL HISTORY TODAY

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Women's Part in the Story of Cider –
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How peasants made the rural landscape

by Christopher Dyer

When we see in the country a small timber-framed house, or an area of ridge and furrow, or an irregular curving hedge line near an old wood, we are often observing a medieval peasant creation.



Peasant house built with crucks (large timbers extending from the ground to the apex of the roof) at Wick near Pershore, Worcestershire. A number of houses of this type in the midlands have been dated to the period 1380–1510. They were normally built by artisans (especially carpenters) employed by peasants. Image: Stephen Price

Peasants were not rich or powerful, but they had a capacity, often when operating together in a community, to make decisions and change the world around them. The peasant contribution to the medieval countryside has emerged gradually in the thinking of historians and archaeologists.

Now is the time to recognize fully the importance of the small-scale cultivators who accounted for most of the rural population. They were involved in a variety of activities, in managing their own households and village communities, in developing farming methods, and in marketing rural produce. The population of towns originated as rural migrants. As jurors, peasants helped to operate the manorial courts that governed their villages, and as parishioners they ran the worldly affairs

of their church or local chapel. Although they were mostly unable to write, others compiled documents on their behalf, and we gain much evidence about them from records produced by their social superiors, such as court rolls. They appear in sermons and poems, and unwritten evidence comes from archaeology, architecture, and art.

Shaping the scene

The aristocracy were often responsible for creating new landscapes. Medieval castles were surrounded by scenic pleasure grounds, such as parks, fish ponds and gardens. Monasteries and secular lords controlled water by damming valleys, digging channels, and draining

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Women's part in the story of cider

There has been a collective forgetfulness around the history of cider, **writes Elizabeth Pimblett.**

In more recent years, it has been seen as the province of the cider counties of Devon, Dorset, Somerset, Herefordshire, and Kent. But, in the seventeenth century, its production was more widespread. And although in the nineteenth century it began to be seen simply as a rough rural drink, consumed by adult male farm workers, before this it appealed across genders and social classes.

References to women and cider can be glancing, like a fifteenth-century Herefordshire court record which shows a burglar charged for the theft of a female householder's bread and cider.

Some seventeenth and eighteenth-century household manuals inform their aristocratic or middle-class female readers how cider could be used to imitate wine. Maria Radcliffe's 1839 'A Modern System of Domestic Cookery: Or, The Housekeeper's Guide' tells readers how it could eke out port:

Take eight gallons of good Port wine, and put it into a clean sixty-gallon cask, first fumed with a match; add to it forty gallons of good cider, and then fill the hogshead with French brandy. The juice of elderberries and sloes will give it the proper degree of roughness, and cochineal will communicate to it a fine brilliant colour.

Pre-printed licensee agreements for drinking establishments in eighteenth-century Herefordshire include authorising the sale of cider. In 1822 Sarah Bull signed one which allowed her to sell 'Bread and other victuals, beer, ale, cider, and other liquors' at her tavern 'The Boar's Head'. A Worcestershire eighteenth-century newspaper article cites the death of a 104-year-old woman, 'whose drink was cider' - which seems to indicate that she drank cider all her life. Women of all classes were drinking and serving cider, but did they make it?

Picking and pressing

Some early household manuals instructed readers in how to make cider, such as Gervase Markham's 1615 manual 'The English Huswife', which described how to oversee the making of cider, perry and the condiment verjuice, which is made from crab apples.¹ Sarah Meachem's 2009 book 'Every Home a Distillery' shows that seventeenth-century English colonists in Chesapeake, America, saw cider making as part of a woman's duties, a clear legacy from the English counties from which they came. Although books on

orcharding in Britain were aimed at men (such as Thomas Barker's 'The country-man's recreation, or the art of planting, graffing, and gardening', 1640) there were women working on Lord Scudamore's estate in Herefordshire in 1667 being paid for apple picking, scouring and scalding vessels for cider making and also, remarkably, pressing and making. Another seventeenth-century reference to women involved in cider making appears in the accounts of Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire; in October 1670, five men were paid one pound and six shillings for 'beating and pressing', and six women were paid six shillings eleven pence for 'picking the apples'.

A male-dominated upsurge of scholarly interest in cider orchards occurred in the seventeenth century, the fashionable project of a number of educated men, with John Evelyn² famously among them. As a result of the English Civil Wars, the gentry focused their attention on what their estates could produce, and further European wars and trade embargoes made wine harder to come by. In the 1660s, papers were given about cider at the fledgling Royal Society, it was touted by some members as a potential national drink, and speculative cider apple

From John Philip's book 'Cyder', 1708, scanned from the book in the Museum of Cider's collection.





From William Henry Pyne's book 'Microcosm of London', 1808-11, scanned from the book in the Museum of Cider's archives; a horse-mill is being used to bruise cider apples.

orchards were planted – permission was even granted for one in Hyde Park, planned by ex-Parliamentarian Colonel Birch. It wasn't just in England; Scottish writer, John Reid, instructed his readers in how to plant orchards and make cider. One of the few references made to women in Evelyn's essay 'Pomona' in 1664 suggests women preferred their cider sweet: 'I once did prefer the Gennet-Moyle Cider, but had only the Ladies on my side, as gentler for their sugary palats...'. Female written voices are rarer, although Celia Fiennes (1685–1712) in her travel journals wrote with confidence on cider production methods, noting the difference in style of pressing, and: 'In most parts of Somers-setshire it is very fruitful for orchards... but they are not curious in the planting the best sort of fruit... else they might have as good a sider as in any other parts, even as good as the Hereffordshire.'

A drink that paid

Until the 1820s, cider held a dual position as a fine drink for the wealthy, and a rougher, lesser-quality beverage for the workers. This depended on the apples used and the way they were pressed. West Country tannic apples, like Royal Wilding or Redstreak, were highly prized, with the dessert and culinary apples of Kent and Sussex being used for an acid-led cider, before becoming more valuable in later centuries as table fruit for London. The bottling of cider from the 1600s onwards made a gentle sparkle possible. No such care was taken for the rougher cider given to labourers - fine cider was sent to London and the rest was kept home on the farm. Male and female workers were also offered 'ciderkin', or 'purr', which was lower alcohol (akin to small beer) produced after the first crushing of the apples, with the residue pomace being pressed with added water to produce a second, lower-alcohol content drink which was also given to the

sick and to children; this did not keep well.

A national Cider Tax on domestic production was imposed in 1763. A Devonshire newspaper lamented the effect it would have on Navy war widows who had not the means to make their own. There was money in cider production as evidenced in the 1790s, when a wealthy Herefordian widow who was forced to vacate her rented farm and leave the furniture, insisted that the cider and perry she made should not be part of the inventory and remained hers to sell. Memorably, she critiques one which turned out as 'ordinary' as only 'fit for working persons & hogs'. The gender-neutral 'persons' is probably significant. In the 1800s all genders were

given cider as Truck wages, a part-payment practice technically made illegal later in the century. An 1843 Poor Law Commissioners' report listed what field workers were paid in selected counties, and across Devon, Dorset and Somerset, women and children, as well as men, were paid in cider and money. The report notes that some women took the cider home for their husbands, and some drank it themselves. On one farm they were given a shilling a day and one quart of cider for potato digging, and seven pence a day with one quart of cider for apple picking. Some concern was raised by a cleric as to whether drinking cider at harvest loosened female morals. The story of cider has many strands.



'The Cider Press' by Henry Bryan Ziegler (1798–1874) from the Museum of Cider's collection.

- 1 Markham, Gervase (1615) 'The English Huswife, containing the inward and outward virtues which ought to be in a complete woman; as her skill in physick, cookery, banqueting-stuff, distillation, perfumes, wool, hemp, flax, dairies, brewing, baking, and all other things belonging to a household.'
- 2 Evelyn, John (1664) 'Pomona, or an appendix concerning fruit trees, in relation to cider. The making and several ways of ordering it.'

The cattle census of 1866

by Tony Pratt

Agricultural statistics are now regularly collected, but this was not always so.

There were investigations in 1795 and 1798, when 'Britain suffered numerous poor harvests and was attempting to calculate the ability of the country to provide sufficient foodstuffs' with two further attempts in 1800 and 1801, but it was only from 1866 that annual surveys were carried out.¹

In that year Britain was in the middle of a serious outbreak of rinderpest, the highly contagious and deadly cattle plague which affected the country from June 1865 until late 1867. At least 334,559 cattle were lost nationwide, with nearly a quarter in Cheshire alone according to the Veterinary Dept of the Privy Council in 1868. This epizootic gave an additional impetus to the collection of agricultural statistics, and the first annual livestock survey was taken on 5 March, followed by a crop census on 25 June, 1866. Some national totals are given in Table 1.

Farmers' suspicions

Stephen Matthews² commented that previous attempts had 'all been defeated by simple but stubborn non-cooperation'. There was distrust about the 1866 survey as well; for example, at a meeting in Wisbech, doubts were expressed about the uses to be made of the results. According to the local newspaper, one farmer felt:

"... he should oppose such a return for it was an underhand and sinister attempt to extort from agriculturalists statistics of their stock. He would never give the information until he was compelled by law. They had been trying to obtain it for this three years but had always been defeated. Why should he give an account of how many beasts and sheep he had and how many acres of wheat he grew? When they got the information it would be 12 months before it was published though it would be [much sooner] known to certain speculators. When commercial men gave an account of all the goods in their shops, then he would give the information required. They might think him unpatriotic or illiberal but he should not do it. If it were for the benefit of the Cattle Plague only then would he give it."
 'The Wisbech Board of Guardians meeting',
Lynn Advertiser, 16 December 1865, 3.

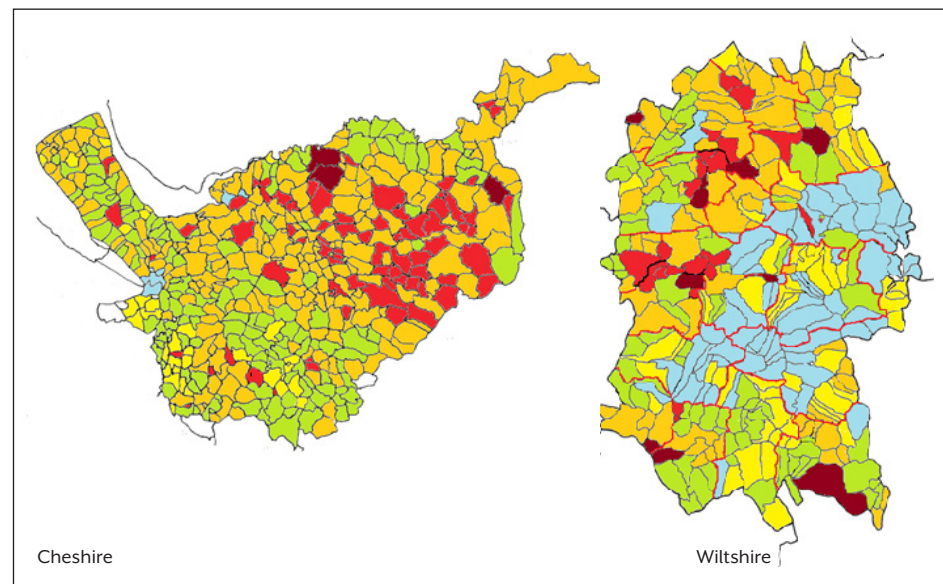
The farmer's concern was understandable; the parish officers tasked with collecting the information were the local Surveyors of Taxes. Matthews discussed several issues which rendered the accuracy of the returns questionable, although he concluded that they were 'substantially accurate'. The census gave the totals seen in Table 1, with 3,848,000 cattle nationwide.

Table 1 National livestock census totals (thousands) 1866 [DEFRA, 2020]

Category	Acres/Head (thousand) England and Wales
Wheat	1,311
Barley	819
Oats	711
Cattle	3,848
Sheep	16,800
Pigs	2,300

From the individual county returns the total county cattle numbers can be calculated, but the returns also allow much smaller areas to be considered. Three counties – Cheshire, Norfolk, and Wiltshire – were selected for investigation at the parish or township scale. The census recorded cattle in several categories – milk cows, cattle two years and above, and cattle under two years of age, all of which require different amounts of resource to maintain. To allow direct comparison between different herd-mixes (dairy and beef, or milking herds v breeding herds etc), Livestock Units (LU) were calculated for each county herd.³ To allow for varying sizes of counties the LU per unit area (in this case 100 acres) was determined. These are mapped in Figure 1 (below).

Figure 1. Livestock Census 1866, Cattle LU per 100 acres at parish/township level for the three study counties. Map is based on the Ordnance Survey Open Data 'County boundaries – Historical dataset' accessed using QGIS v3.16.11. The Lincolnshire and the base map was amended to include these areas. Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database



▶ Tony Pratt's thesis 'The Cattle Plague of 1865–67: A Comparative Study' can be accessed at: https://cris.winchester.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/14656561/Tony_Pratt_Cattle_Plague_THESIS.pdf

▶ Vision of Britain, 2017. 'Cattle per 100 acres' 'Vision of Britain' Great Britain Historical GIS Project 2004–17©. England and Wales 1869 at www.visionofbritain.org.uk/atlas/map/R_CATTLE/ANC_CNTY/1869, Scotland 1870 at www.visionofbritain.org.uk/atlas/map/R_CATTLE/SCO_CNTY/1870 both accessed 25 March 2022.

Table 2 Percentage of county total areas per LU category

	LU per 100 acres					
	<2	2-3.99	4-9.99	10-19.99	20-49.99	>50
Cheshire	1.3	7.0	32.1	42.7	16.6	0.4
Norfolk	7.2	25.5	61.2	5.6	0.4	0.1
Wiltshire	20.9	15.7	24.5	24.5	10.8	3.6

Table 3 Census numbers, loss from Cattle Plague and possible pre-epizootic national and county herd sizes

	Census	Losses June 1865 - 5 March 1866	Possible numbers pre June 1865
England & Wales	3,384,000	253,949	3,637,949
Cheshire	93,970	54,987	148,957
Norfolk	89,835	5,791	95,625
Wiltshire	75,558	135	75,693

Distribution and density

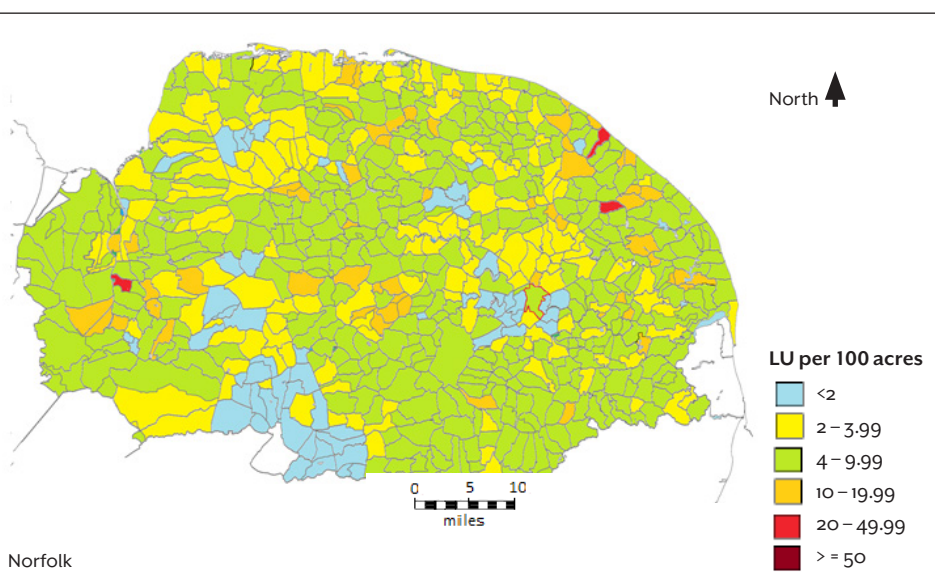
Each LU category depicts different levels of cattle stocking density by parish, and an analysis of the number in each category in a county gives an idea of cattle density variability (Table 2). This reveals whether most of the cattle were in small or large herds or were spatially distributed more evenly. These data indicate that Wiltshire had a much more even distribution of cattle than either Cheshire or Norfolk, with Cheshire having more high-density areas, with the greatest concentrations in the northern two thirds of the county, and Norfolk considerably fewer. It is clear that Cheshire had very high densities of cattle, Wiltshire less so (although Wiltshire had the highest individual total), and Norfolk relatively low densities. Where Norfolk cattle densities

did approach those of the other areas, the locations were very small and geographically dispersed. The areas of high cattle numbers in Wiltshire correspond to the 'clay' areas in the county, supporting the famous 'chalk and cheese' distribution, with cheese produced in the dairy on clay soils, and cereals on chalky ones.

The Cattle Plague had reached its peak, with many thousands of animals lost before the census was taken. The Veterinary Dept of the Privy Council reported the epizootic details of these losses for each county allowing estimates to be made of the number of cattle at county scale before the census (Table 3). It is acknowledged that it is impossible to know how accurate the figures are; the reported losses were certainly lower than the reality. The compilers of the official *Report* admitted 'the Inspector's Reports do

not furnish the exact number of outbreaks... some attacks have probably escaped being reported... and in other instances may have [been] incorrectly reported'.⁴ The results suggest that the number of animals in each county varied much more than the census indicates; the difference between cattle numbers in Cheshire and Norfolk was a third of that between Norfolk and Wiltshire. However, the pre-epizootic estimates suggest the difference between Cheshire and Norfolk was actually more than twice as great as that between Norfolk and Wiltshire. The census gives the impression that cattle numbers in the three counties were much more similar than they really were, the disparity being caused by the huge pre-survey losses in Cheshire. This has implications for the conclusions drawn from using these census results for cattle. The 1866 Livestock survey shows that the numbers of cattle and their stocking densities, both between and within the study areas, varied considerably and the data support the commonly held views of Cheshire as a considerable dairying county; of Wiltshire having distinct cattle areas mostly on the 'clay' and the highest stocking densities of all three counties; and Norfolk as having many fewer cattle, with the majority in 'middle density' areas. Further work at parish level is planned, however the data for cattle from the survey should be used with caution.

county outlines produced by this dataset do not include the Metropolis, the Ridings of Yorkshire or the three divisions of right 2018.



- 1 'Agricultural statistics in England and Wales', TNA Research Guide at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/agricultural-statistics-england-wales/ accessed 16 May 2023.
- 2 Matthews, Stephen (2000) 'The administration of the livestock census of 1866', *The Agricultural History Review*, 48 (2), pp. 223-238.
- 3 Livestock Unit : 'a reference unit which facilitates the aggregation of livestock from various species and age as per convention', eurostat at [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Livestock_unit_\(LSU\)#:~:text=The%20reference%20unit%20used%20for,annually%2C%20without%20additional%20concentrated%20of%20foodstuffs.](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Livestock_unit_(LSU)#:~:text=The%20reference%20unit%20used%20for,annually%2C%20without%20additional%20concentrated%20of%20foodstuffs.) Accessed 16 May 2023.
- 4 The Veterinary Department of the Privy Council Office (1868) *Report of the Cattle Plague in Great Britain During the Years 1865, 1866 and 1867*. London: HMSO, 1867), 3.

The value of Ireland

by Paul Warde

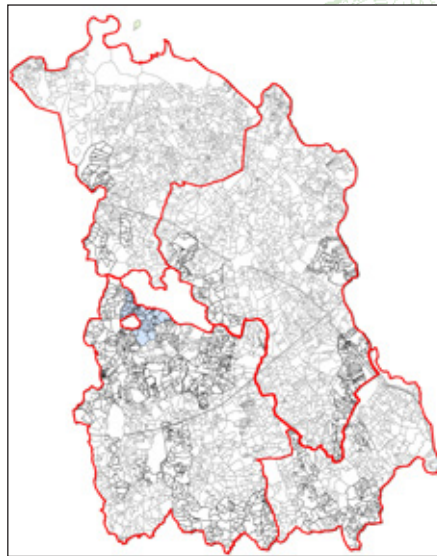
In the forty years between 1824 and 1864, Ireland was mapped and surveyed to an extent never achieved before, laying the basis for the valuation of land until the late twentieth century.

The trigger for these efforts was a deep dissatisfaction with the system of local government, based on Grand Juries appointed from a very limited tranche of the population, which funded the maintenance of infrastructure through a 'county cess' levied upon the occupiers of land. By the early nineteenth century its allocation was widely recognised as both corrupt and extremely variable. Accurate mapping would provide for an equitable assessment and tax.

To a degree wholly unanticipated by its instigators, this effort would end up in 1864 with a general valuation of Ireland, maps that showed every field boundary and house in the land, linked to a listing of every single occupier of property. The valuations attached to property would become a potent weapon and reference point in the 'Land War' of the late nineteenth century, in which nationalist politicians fought to change rents and the terms of tenure – using a tool the British army had created!



Sir Richard Griffith



Digitized boundaries of Kilmore, Drumcree and Tartaraghan parishes; Max Satchell

These sources represent a treasure-trove of information for the rural historian. This is especially because Ireland otherwise lacks *individual or household* data for this period. Despite censuses being taken from 1821, hardly any enumerators' books survive from before 1901.

Mapping and translating

The first series of Ordnance Survey maps were completed by the early 1830s, focusing on topography and 'townland' boundaries. Townlands were fundamental units into which much, though not all, of Ireland had been divided, derived from the Gaelic pastoral economy and typically 50-60 acres. From 1825, the maps were wedded to what became called 'Griffith's Valuation', after the Irish officer Richard Griffith. He developed a meticulous system of valuation based on the soil quality of each townland, adjusted for proximity to markets, access to fertiliser (like seaweed), with taxes and tithes deducted, producing a figure to be weighted according to a basket of agricultural prices from 1816.¹ This last adjustment was designed to deal with the fact that the valuation took years to achieve, and national equity demanded valuations should not vary according to the year they were taken. Then the 'cess' could be allocated as a proportion of the valuation of each townland and divided among the

occupiers. After 1844, the poor rates would be allotted by the same method.

During the 1830s, Survey teams accomplished two additional tasks. They collected information on the antiquities and habits of Ireland, alongside the creation of definitive (to the authorities) names for each townland, derived more (or less) accurately from Irish originals. The ubiquitous 'duff', for example, derives from it being assigned for the Irish 'dubh', meaning black. They also wrote 'memorials' providing socio-economic information on each parish, which have been transcribed and published by the Ulster Historical Foundation in forty volumes. Although of variable quality, some are fantastically rich sources covering much of the northern counties. They were sadly (for the historian) discontinued in 1839 because of the expense.

By the mid-1840s, it was realised that townland valuations would be inadequate for the equitable allocation of poor rates, and work began on a new Griffith's Valuation for every house and holding, based on the same methods as before. Delayed by the famine, this was completed between 1853 and 1864, using a base price year of 1852. Maps and valuation books were then updated for decades afterwards, providing an ongoing record of Irish property-holding.² The northern counties were finished last, ironically because they had been mapped first, but those early maps had not included field boundaries. These boundaries were needed to value individual plots and hence the maps all had to be redone.

These sources have been used surprisingly little by historians. Wonderful maps have been generated with the *aggregate* valuations for larger land units, but not the rich data at a townland or plot level. Scholars have debated, sometimes controversially, the cultural dimensions of the surveys, especially their treatment of 'folklore' (a term not yet coined at the time) and the Irish language; Brian Friel's famous play *Translations* (1980) was based on the Survey's work.³ Historians have examined Griffith's Valuation in the light of the politics of 'fair rents' and landlordism, not least because Griffiths explicitly intended the value to reflect a 'fair letting value to a solvent tenant' – a potent idea in nineteenth-century Ireland.



Map of Kingarve townland, 1st edition Ordnance survey map with soil types drawn over the top, c.1836. (VAL/1/A/2/9)

Old problems and new methods

Work begun at Cambridge University (part funded by the Keynes Fund) has a different focus: the detailed local information in the valuations, maps, and memoirs themselves. Historians studying the agriculture, rents, and social structure of Ireland, before and around the Great Famine, know that a large class of labourers and cottiers existed, often connected to the textile industry. Many, or perhaps most, of these had access to land through sub-lets or 'conacre' tenancies for a single potato season, paid for by their labour. But the true parameters of this economy are largely unknown, because the few studies of local economies have mostly used landlord records such as Estate accounts and leases to 'head tenants', biased towards larger holdings.

This research, beginning with the Ulster memoirs and parishes of County Armagh's 'linen triangle', seeks to examine the true extent of access to land through the digitization of the survey, maps, and landlord and tithe records. The north of Ireland is understood not as an overpopulated land living off the potato, but rather a society of intense proto-industry, subject to an economic shock from the 1820s through competition from the industrialising cities – before the Famine cut down at least a tenth of the population.

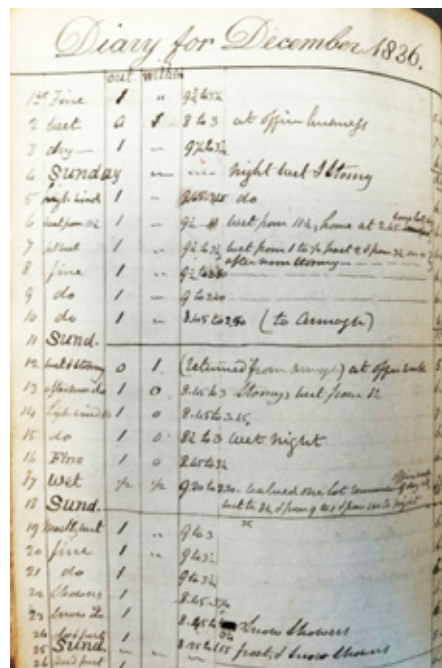
A digital vision

The final valuation of Ireland was completed some years after those events, but the houses, landscape, and values represent the enduring imprint of the earlier society. The valuation provides a complete 'baseline' of the occupation of land and houses from which we can seek, townland by townland, to reconstruct what was there before. Equally, digitization allows a deep assessment of the Surveys themselves. Are the printed acreages the same as the mapped ones? (Not entirely!) We can plot market access, soils, landlords, the presence of cottiers – how did these factors actually affect the values recorded? We can reconstruct the true size of farms made up of separated plots held by individuals (or families). We can ask why plots, held by the same individual, were recorded separately although making up one farm?

Although the initial digitization of the target parishes is complete, setting up the data for analysis is a slow process. The mapped plots and the printed survey data has to be reliably linked. Holders of different plots with the same name must be checked as to whether they are the same or separate individuals (fortunately the continued updating of valuation books and

Co. of Linn.	Description of Lots	Quantity	Amount of Land
1	Mostly good deep brown clayey soil on bed clay with a small portion sandy & pebbly, a little good clay soil moory meadows well lying level part	33 2 12/100	30 0 0
	Also coarse meadow & good green pasture, cold clay & moory soil (work at house part)	2 0	3 1 3
10	Moory meadow on clay disband - 1/2 but long retained from bog	9 1 30/100	8 3 4 1
2	Clayey and sandy clay suitable for till of medium depth part deep on clay or long clay soil	34 2 10/100	18 0 1 2 1
	Carried forward	81 2 12	69 3 7 9

First Griffiths valuation of Kingarve townland, December 1836 (VAL/1/B/226B)



Diary of the evaluator of Drumcree parish, December 1836, listing work and bad weather (VAL/1/B/226B)

introduction of registration of marriages and deaths in the 1860s facilitates this. The reconstruction of the true state of affairs in the 1860s can then be compared with the more partial glimpses provided by leases, rentals, poor law rates (which excluded the actual poor), tithe records and other material. The digitized mapping of Griffiths' Valuation can provide a springboard to reconstruct the rural economy of earlier generations, relating this to information on crops, yields, prices and incomes recorded in the memoirs. We hope to demonstrate the degree to which these sources can move us beyond commentary and general observations (often from outsiders) to excavate the economic lives and landscape of the ordinary people of Ulster in a period of crisis – and, on the very personal level, of those thousands upon thousands of individuals named in the source.

Images with kind permission of The Deputy Keeper of the Records, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland.

- 1 This is superbly explained in Smyth, W.A., 'Sir Richard Griffith's three valuations of Ireland 1826–1864', PhD, NUI Maynooth, 2008.
- 2 Searchable images of the printed returns can be found at Home (askaboutireland.ie), and the images of the updated Valuators Revisions for the following decades are provided by the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland.
- 3 For a recent discussion, see Ó Cadhla, S., *Civilizing Ireland. Ordnance Survey 1824–1842* (2007).

Continued from front page

wetlands. Monks, and especially Cistercians, are often credited with reclamation and colonisation projects.

Many modifications of the natural world, however, were the work of peasants. They were responsible for cleaning ditches and maintaining flood defences in fens and marshes. They also instigated projects on their own initiative, like John Smith, a peasant of Tanworh-in-Arden (in Warwickshire) who dammed a stream to make a fishpond, later called Smythespool, in about 1332. Lords are known to have cleared woodland for agriculture in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but many acres in royal forests, or on 'wastes' belonging to lords of manors were brought into cultivation, or enclosed for pasture, by peasants, not necessarily with encouragement or permission. The king usually accepted the result if a fine was paid, and lords insisted on payments of rent.

Medieval peasants removed the trees and vegetation to make small irregular fields connected by crooked lanes leading to a spread of scattered houses which can still survive in woodland landscapes. A peasant showing enterprise was William the Cooper, who is recorded in 1270 as clearing (with others) a piece of wood in Blicley in the royal forest of Feckenham (in Worcestershire), enclosing it with a ditch and hedge, and planting it with oats in the first year and wheat in the second. The king's forest officials fined him a shilling, and the local lord required him to pay an annual rent of two shillings, but he could afford to pay because of the value of the wheat crop. He was not entirely dependent on his land, as his name reveals that his craft was to use the wood available nearby to make barrels, for which there was a ready market in the nearby town of Droitwich.

Conflict and control

Enclosing wood or waste and turning it into a cornfield caused conflict within peasant society, because encroachment on common pasture threatened the livelihood of those with animals to feed. Matters might come to a head with crowds gathering to tear down fences and hedges and reclaim the land for pasture. Such outbursts were characteristic of communities in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries now on the southern edge of the Birmingham conurbation at places such as Yardley, King's Norton and Solihull. Some peasants 'improved' the land with more intensive farming, while their neighbours in effect formed a conservation movement, protecting grassland, scrub, and woodland. William the Cooper belonged to both camps, as he needed the corn he grew, but his craft depended on an abundance of trees.

In the areas where woods were few, and open fields stretched out for miles, the compact villages sometimes were set out in regular plans, with rows of houses ranged along both sides of a street, and rectangular gardens and closes behind them, resembling part of a modern housing estate. Neatly arranged open fields, with groups of equal sized strips, stretched out from the village, with boundaries often at right angles to the street. Such

There was a crooked lane

Modern observers, and those driving along country lanes, are often puzzled by the twists and turns followed by the road. These crooked lanes were not the product of irrational minds, nor were our ancestors always drunken, as G K Chesterton's poem 'The Rolling English Road' suggests. The many small fields carved out of woods, or which were defining new enclosures, were deliberately defined in oval shapes or with curved boundaries because the peasants who were doing the work appreciated that such shapes needed a shorter length of hedge or fence. The roads which gave access to the new fields, or which were taking traffic on longer journeys through the enclosed landscape had to observe the bends in the boundaries.

settlements are commonly seen as a sign of the control of living space by lords. Such planning by a superior authority is very rarely recorded, and just as the villagers as communities took charge of the fields, so they were capable of organising villages in an orderly fashion. They sometimes took over the end of strips in the open field to form the framework for a settlement. In the Cotswolds they might adapt the grid of boundaries left behind by an abandoned Romano-British field system. They made choices based on local circumstances, and had a direct interest in their own settlement, whereas many lords were remote absentees.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, lords were often associated with the enclosure of cultivated land and the removal of settlements, as they saw profit in pastoral farming on a large scale. This was a notable feature of south-east Warwickshire where graziers and gentry lords, like the Spencers and Catesbys, made fortunes by specialising in sheep and cattle. Nor were peasants always the hapless victims of these changes, as they could mount a spirited resistance to enclosure. On the other hand, individuals might be enclosing land, at least on a small scale, and keeping more livestock. Other peasants abandoned their houses in villages because they wished to move elsewhere, and their neighbours were willing to take over vacant land, so that some villages were seriously weakened by the loss of inhabitants before the lord, or his farmer, embarked on a policy of depopulation. Kings, lords, and the church played a part in the forming and dismantling of landscapes, but the influence of the peasants, though implemented quietly, could be decisive.

► Christopher Dyer's new book *Peasants Making History. Living in an English Region 1200-1540* is published by the Oxford University Press. It has been awarded (jointly with Jane Rowling's *Environments of Identity*) the British Agricultural History Society's Joan Thirsk prize for 2022. For a 30% discount on *Peasants Making History* use promo code AAFLYG6 at www.oup.com

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