

Mr Beresford and the Lost Villages: a Comment

By J. D. GOULD

MR BERESFORD's recent volume on the lost villages is an important achievement in agrarian historiography.¹ Its subject is one likely to appeal to a wide variety of reader, from erudite professional to the merest layman. The following comments are offered by one close to the latter end of that scale, for the present writer has no pretensions to more than a marginal acquaintance with Mr Beresford's subject. The criticism of one aspect of Mr Beresford's argument put forward in this paper is therefore submitted with the humility proper to a self-confessed amateur, and moreover it may be that the criticism—which is, however, a major one—has suggested itself to the present writer not so much as an objection to any view which Mr Beresford really holds but as a consequence of a form of presentation which entails the repetition of some points and the virtual omission of others. Even if this is so, however, it seems important that a work which will be read by many an enthusiast with something less than a complete grasp of the findings of modern research should be reliable in its implications as much as in what it explicitly states.

I

Mr Beresford argues that most of our lost villages died in the period 1450–1520. The mid-sixteenth century, which the opinion of contemporaries would have suggested to us as the years when the “black biting monster” was at its most voracious, and the reign of Elizabeth were by contrast times of relative quiescence. Within the period 1450–1520, again, the rate of mortality is said to have been higher in the first thirty-five years than in the remainder. The net cast by the investigation of 1517–8, therefore, which took cognizance only of cases of depopulation occurring after 1488, failed to catch the largest part of its potential haul. The cause of this depopulation is located without hesitation in the profits of sheep-farming. In the later fifteenth century, we learn, wool production became relatively more profitable than that of corn; in consequence, landowners converted land from arable to pasture, in the process enclosing the common fields, evicting their

¹ M. Beresford, *The Lost Villages of England*, Lutterworth Press, 1954. Subsequent page references in the text are to this work.

tillers, and not stopping short even of the destruction of whole villages.¹

Having given such an explanation of the rise of village mortality, it comes naturally to Mr Beresford to explain its subsequent decline in terms of the opposite situation. Cloth exports reached their highest point in the mid-sixteenth century, and in the reign of Elizabeth settled down to a level something like three-quarters of the peak figure. The growth of population, and particularly of towns dependent on the countryside for their food-supply, combined with this stabilization of demand for wool to cause a rise of corn prices compared with those of wool. "This must have been reflected in the fortunes and optimism of graziers. There was no longer that clear advantage in growing wool rather than corn. Indeed in some districts the movement began to be towards more ploughland" (p. 214). Mid-sixteenth century and Elizabethan pamphleteers and preachers continued to fulminate against depopulating enclosure. They did so in fear of a recurrence of a flood of village destruction which had already receded, but "perhaps only the increased profitability of corn in the second half of the sixteenth century prevented its second coming" (p. 146).

This seems all very well, but there is a snag. The careful reader will note that Mr Beresford does not actually tell him that less land was being enclosed and converted in the late Tudor and early Stuart periods, but he might well be forgiven if he inferred from Mr Beresford's presentation that this was the case. Later fifteenth century: wool profitable compared with corn, therefore much enclosure and conversion, therefore destruction of villages; these are the bare bones of Mr Beresford's argument. Later sixteenth century: corn profitable compared with wool . . . therefore much less destruction of villages. The second proposition seems to cry out for the interpolation of the middle term "therefore less enclosure and conversion." Nor does Mr Beresford help the unwary reader to avoid the trap by giving him any facts which would prove the interpolation incorrect. The reader learns, for example, that the findings of the 1607 Commission "deal with simple cases of enclosure on a small scale," and also reflect the enclosure of larger areas "by the assent of the proprietors and without the destruction of the village. This is the 'enclosure and depopulation' of 1607. It cannot rank with the huge enclosures and total depopulation of a century earlier" (p. 145).

¹ Mr Beresford's argument that grass became more profitable than corn in the later fifteenth century because of a rise in wool prices relative to those of corn, is not wholly convincing. It is not easy to accept his thesis that there was a very significant shift in demand for wool in the period, and Dr Bowden may be nearer the mark in suggesting that the special attractiveness of wool lay in lower costs of production at least as much as in relatively high selling prices.—P. J. Bowden, 'Movements in Wool Prices, 1490-1610', *Yorks. Bull. of Econ. and Soc. Res.*, IV, 1952, 109-24.

Our reader might after this be surprised to learn, and Mr Beresford does not tell him, that in the six counties investigated both in 1517-8 and 1607 the aggregate acreage shown as enclosed and converted was substantially greater in the second investigation than in the first.¹ Again, Dr Parker's thesis on Tudor enclosures in Leicestershire is drawn on for a case illustrating the point that even the larger enclosures of this later period generally brought only "hedged fields but not the empty village" (p. 145). Mr Beresford does not, however, draw the reader's attention to another finding of Dr Parker's researches, namely that the average annual rate of enclosure in Leicestershire in the period 1580-1607 was not far short of twice that in the period 1485-1520.²

Mr Beresford could of course retort that he was writing a history of deserted villages and not of the enclosure movement. There would be force in such a rejoinder, though one might still be justified in regretting that in a work which extends over 400 pages, and permits itself divagations in many directions, space could not have been found for a few sentences clearing up a side-issue as important as this. But one cannot entirely avoid the suspicion that Mr Beresford may have had another and less valid reason for not mentioning the continuance in the Midland shires of enclosure and conversion at a high rate. For had he quite explicitly stated the fact, he would then have had to account for two apparent difficulties. Why, in the first place, did the rate of village mortality decline while that of enclosure and conversion did not? And why, if the "balance of advantage," as he argues, tilted heavily towards corn from the late sixteenth century, did such enclosure and conversion continue to take place at all? Mr Beresford would

¹ E. F. Gay, 'The Midland Revolt and the Inquisitions of Depopulation of 1607', *Trans. Royal Hist. Soc.*, New Series, XVIII, 1904, pp. 195-237; J. D. Gould, 'The Inquisition of Depopulation of 1607 in Lincolnshire', *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, LXVII, 1952, pp. 392-5.

² A comparison of acreages enclosed as reported by the official returns on the one hand, with the acreages worked out by Dr Parker from all types of evidence on the other, shows that for Leicestershire the 1517-8 commissioners reported 43 per cent of Dr Parker's total, and their 1607 successors 60 per cent. In both cases the lower totals of the commissioners were due less to the complete omission of villages where enclosure had taken place than to the underestimating of acreages in those places which were reported on. In considerable part, however, this 'underestimating' is only apparent, and reflects the fact that the commissioners were required to report only enclosures of arable for conversion, whereas Dr Parker's figures include a significant area already under pasture at the time of enclosure. Dr Parker records 11,100 acres enclosed in the first thirty-five years of the Tudor period, compared with nearly 15,000 in the shorter period 1580-1607. These figures are however subject to the qualification that Dr Parker had to omit a number of cases for which acreages could not be estimated.—L. A. Parker, *Enclosure in Leicestershire, 1485-1607*, London Ph.D. thesis, 1949, pp. 187-8.

have had little difficulty in solving the first of these problems, but there is no suggestion in his book that he knew the answer to the second, and if he did not, the consistency of his argument could only be maintained by tactfully avoiding any emphasis on the awkward fact that long after most of the lost villages had disappeared, the current of changing land-use over much of the Midlands continued to flow away from arable and towards pasture.

II

The answer to the first of our two problems is well enough known, and indeed is really given by Mr Beresford himself, albeit in a rather haphazard and incidental way. In the first place, there would be a natural tendency, as he several times points out, for the smaller places and the places where the tenurial structure was favourable to the would-be convertor to go first. As these riper villages disappeared, therefore, there would be an ever greater stimulus to proceed if possible by agreement, and if not, to enclose and convert something less than the whole area of a village.¹ Secondly, some weight must clearly be allowed to Tudor agrarian legislation and to the fact that Tudor prerogative courts and administration were more able and willing to give protection to tenants than their predecessors (p. 212 and chapter 4). Further, from the later sixteenth century a gradual change came over the enclosure movement in that the peasantry themselves took an increasing share in initiating the change of land-use—partly, no doubt, because for reasons already given the path of the big landowner was becoming more difficult, and partly because many smaller men had taken advantage of the opportunities offered by the conditions of the period to strengthen their economic position.²

III

Our second problem is more difficult. The paragraphs which follow suggest one possible solution, but a satisfactory answer will not be arrived at without further research which, if carried out with a clear understanding of the analytical problems involved, could make a contribution of major significance to our knowledge of economic growth in the early modern period.

We arrive at the core of the difficulty if we re-examine Mr Beresford's argument concerning regional variations in the rates of conversion and of village mortality. He explains these in terms of the suitability of different lands for different purposes. Land which was markedly more suited to corn would remain under the plough even when the "balance of advantage"

¹ Cf. W. G. Hoskins's remarks in 'The Deserted Villages of Leicestershire': *Essays in Leicestershire History*, Liverpool, 1950, pp. 106-7.

² Parker, *op. cit.*, pp. 190 ff.

was strongly in favour of grass. Land markedly more suited to grass, or with large areas of woodland, would be unable to spare greater acreages for pasture and would have achieved a balance between competing land-uses before the late fifteenth century. It was the marginal lands of the Inner Midlands, almost equally suited to corn and to grass, which responded most sensitively, so Mr Beresford tells us, to the increased margin of profit from pasture as demand for wool grew relatively to that for corn in the later fifteenth century.

Common sense is on the side of this theory. But if it were in itself an adequate explanation, why on these same lands—sensitive, as Mr Beresford himself recognizes they must have been, to swings of the “balance of advantage” *in either direction*—was there not a very substantial degree of reconversion to arable if, as we are told, the balance swung markedly back in favour of corn in the later sixteenth century?¹ Why, on the contrary, did the process of conversion to pasture continue, as the 1607 returns and other evidence agree in showing it to have done?

It may be that Mr Beresford has oversimplified the market situation. The market for wool was a very wide one; that is to say, the value of wool was sufficiently high in proportion to its weight for it to be economically worth while to carry wool for long distances by land. Therefore it is realistic to consider aggregate national demand for wool—and, for that matter, international demand too—as having some influence on land-use in every part of the country. The market for corn, however—and it is this which Mr Beresford overlooks—was more restricted, because, save in years of exceptional dearth, it was not profitable in sixteenth-century conditions to carry corn more than a relatively few miles *by land*. It could be, however, carried for long distances by water. The growth in London's demand for corn, therefore, which was certainly an important determinant of economic development in the late sixteenth century, did not act in so simple a way as might be imagined. The demand was of course partly met by imports, but so far as English corn served the need, it came from areas of good corn land relatively near the sea, or in the Upper Thames basin (whence it was transported down-current by river). In these areas, therefore, metropolitan demand exercised a significant influence; the level of corn prices was generally higher than the average for the country as a whole, and the differential of

¹ Mr Beresford is not unaware of this objection, but I find his reply to it—in terms of the difficulties of reconversion—unconvincing. Landowners who, when the profit motive had pulled towards grass, had braved the practical difficulties and unpopularity of the convertor, would surely not have been slow to reconvert with the whole weight of governmental policy and public opinion in their favour. In any case the reply does not explain the continuance of conversion to pasture.

profit in favour of the plough was maintained, as London grew, so as to keep the rate of conversion to a low level. In the Inner Midlands, however, the situation was different. The region was for the most part neither connected with London by water, nor near enough by land for metropolitan demand to exercise there a significant and regular influence. The area was, then, one of low corn prices,¹ and a small rise in the marginal rate of profit on pasture would exercise a maximum effect. When in February 1620 the Justices of the Peace for Leicestershire were invited to consider the provision of a storehouse for corn, they excused themselves on the ground that a storehouse was superfluous in their county, this being "remote from any means of exporting grain."² Towards the end of the Stuart period Andrew Yarranton, trying to persuade landowners that improvements of inland waterways were to their advantage, pointed out that the price of corn was low in Leicestershire, and in Warwickshire until the Avon was made navigable, these counties "having no Navigable River near to carry it away," and farmers being in consequence "lockt up in the Inlands."³ It was this remoteness which insulated most of the Inner Midlands from the growing corn demands of the capital, and allowed the region to continue as the classic area of enclosure for conversion even in the early Stuart period.

This picture is, of course, painted with a very broad brush indeed, and there were probably major regional variations even within the Midland area. For example, parts of Buckinghamshire (which returned a lower acreage of enclosure in 1607 than in 1517) came within the Upper Thames sector of the metropolitan grain market, as did much of Oxfordshire (which was not visited at all in 1607). Some parts of the South Midlands, notably of Bedfordshire, fattened cattle for the London market, and from an early date some of Bedfordshire's enclosures must have been for meat, not wool, production. As London grew, the meat demand of the capital probably influenced wider and wider areas; it was certainly to the satisfaction of that

¹ N. S. B. Gras, *The Evolution of the English Corn Market*, Harvard Economic Studies, XIII, 1926, p. 119. This evidence relates to the late seventeenth century, but there can be little doubt that price differentials as between regions would be similar a century earlier. Most of Rogers's prices for corn came from places more or less under the influence of London demand, and thus reflected the rise of metropolitan prices from the late sixteenth century onwards. Dr Bowden (*loc. cit.*) combined Rogers's corn prices with his own wool prices and thus naturally found relative prices moving decisively in favour of corn in the late Tudor and early Stuart periods. Mr Beresford, in turn, supported his explanation of the arrest of depopulation by Dr Bowden's tables, not realizing that as a measure of relative price movements as between wool and corn they might not be valid for areas unaffected by metropolitan demand for corn.

² *Cal. S. P. Dom.*, 1619-23, p. 124.

³ Quoted in T. S. Willan, *River Navigation in England*, O.U.P., 1936, p. 46.

demand that increasing areas of Leicestershire's rich pastures were devoted as the seventeenth century progressed.¹

IV

The above argument, if valid, would in part supplement and in part correct Mr Beresford's account of the chronology, causes, and geography of the conversion movement. It requires confirmation or refutation at many points, and it is for the local historian to undertake the research which will provide one or the other of these. More accurate knowledge of prices, particularly of regional variations in the prices of primary products, would carry us a long way. Detailed studies of crop and stock distributions, like those of Dr Hoskins for Leicestershire and Dr Thirsk for Lincolnshire, provide valuable clues, especially if we can have them for contrasted types of county and at different dates for the same county.² Our knowledge of local markets in the early modern period is conspicuous mainly by its absence. Until further research on these points, however, is forthcoming, the foregoing suggestions provide a perhaps plausible refinement to the argument, and smooth over some of the difficulties from which Mr Beresford's account does not seem entirely free.

¹ W. G. Hoskins, 'The Leicestershire Farmer in the Seventeenth Century', *Agricultural History*, xxv, 1951.

² For example, Dr Hoskins's work on Leicestershire inventories in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries confirms that the county was virtually immune from the influence of London's demand—or any growing demand—for corn. There is no evidence of such influence in what the inventories reveal about land-use.

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part of Vol. III a list giving particulars of research in progress. Now that the Review is appearing twice yearly, it is hoped to make such lists a regular feature, alternating with the bibliographies of recent books and articles on agrarian history. The editor and compiler wish to thank all those members of the British Agricultural History Society and others who have assisted by supplying details of their own work; and they will be glad at any time to receive further information enabling the list to be amplified and brought up to date.

DR C. S. ORWIN

Members will have heard with regret of the death of Dr C. S. Orwin. Dr Orwin was the first director of the Oxford University Agricultural Economics Research Institute, a post which he held from 1913 until his retirement in 1946. It was in the field of agricultural economics that most of his work lay, but he also played an extremely important part in furthering the study of agricultural history. Since the formation of the Society his health prevented him from attending any of the

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