

The Scarcity of 1800: A Contemporary Account

By SALIM RASHID

THE Revd Henry Beeke (1751–1837) was perhaps the earliest unofficial analyst of economic issues for governments in the nineteenth century. He was a close friend of several other prominent Tories, such as Nicholas Vansittart and J C Herries,¹ and his one published work consists of a critique of the methods by which the value of William Pitt's income tax had been estimated.² It is likely that this pamphlet led to a meeting with Pitt in Addington's house in 1800. Pitt asked Beeke for a table of prices of corn and meat; Beeke duly complied, and even supplied some rhymes, a subject in which he had heard Pitt to express an interest. Thereafter Beeke regularly provided advice on topics such as funding and paper money.³ In 1801 Beeke accepted the post of Professor of Modern History at Oxford, and, at the insistence of Addington, delivered the earliest known lectures on political economy at that institution.⁴

The document that follows is an extract from a memorandum sent to Addington by Beeke in October 1800, and was intended to assure leading members of the administration of the adequacy of the harvest of that year.⁵ The exertions of the war with France, when combined with the scarcities of 1797 and 1799, had excited the populace considerably — a poster at Bath read: 'Peace and Large

Bread or a King without a head'⁶ — and Beeke was concerned to allay alarmist fears. As much of our information regarding this period comes from Arthur Young, Sir John Sinclair and the Board of Agriculture, it is interesting to note Beeke's disrespect for these authorities:⁷

If we are to rely on such hasty guesses (to say the best of them) as Mr. A. Young's respecting the stock on hand last year, and Mr. C. Scott's respecting the prospects of supplying the deficiency from abroad, we shall be for ever alarmed, for ever regulating and legislating without any advantage to the publick. The busy and vain imbecility of Sir J. Sinclair and the strange assertions of Messieurs A. Young, Middleton and other Empiricks in political economy will best be appreciated, and their intentions most clearly comprehended by those who have read as much of their publications as I have done.

The extract below consists of about ten pages of a forty-page document. Beeke began by calling the deficiency of one-fourth in the crop, announced by the Duke of Portland,⁸ to be 'demonstrably, if not self-evidently erroneous'. In a detailed account, Beeke argued that although there had been local failures, there was no general deficiency. He wrote as though he had direct knowledge of Hampshire, Dorset and Wiltshire; he was informed of the crops in the eastern counties by a friend, and of the north of England and Scotland by Nicholas Vansittart, both of whom had just concluded extensive tours of these areas. Beeke firmly believed that the apparent dearth was caused by rumours of a real dearth, and proceeded to give a detailed account of affairs in his own parish to show

¹ This biographical note is based on a reading of the Herries MSS at the British Library and the Sidmouth Papers at the Devon Record Office. Beeke's name is variously spelled Beek, Beck, Beak, Beake.

² *Observations on the Produce of the Income Tax*, 1800. This pamphlet was praised by J R McCulloch and Robert Giffen.

³ Devon RO: Sidmouth Papers.

⁴ W R Ward, *Victorian Oxford*, 1965, p 50.

⁵ Devon RO: Sidmouth Papers, hereafter referred to as *Memorandum*. It consists of forty handwritten pages.

⁶ Quoted by W F Galpin, *The Grain Supply of England during the Napoleonic Period*, New York, Macmillan, 1925, p 19.

⁷ *Memorandum*, p 25.

⁸ For further details, see Galpin, op cit, ch 2.

how such false opinions could be generated.⁹ 'You may possibly think this statement too minute,' Beeke told Addington, 'but it is scrupulously correct and I produce it as an example of the way in which Market Conversations, and vague opinions hastily disseminated, operate on Men of whose Honesty and Candour I have not the smallest suspicion.' In order to provide an objective account, Beeke then provided the following details of the entire wheat-growing season and concluded by urging that Britain follow the lead of Holland and form a free-trade emporium.¹⁰ It would be interesting to know what Beeke thought of the Corn Law of 1815!

Henry Beeke on the Scarcity of Corn
Ufton Oct. 23rd, 1800.¹¹

Undoubtedly during the month of September the Markets were almost everywhere very scantily supplied; and undoubtedly a great alarm has been excited as to the deficiency of the present crop; but which I must say I believe to have originated chiefly in London. Certainly it has been more general, was more *early*, is as ill-founded and has had more influence on the Markets in the Neighborhood of the Metropolis than in counties more distant.

This very scanty supply of the Markets must chiefly be attributed to the unprecedented

deficiency of last year's crop both in quantity and quality. And the complaints (where honest) may be easily explained by considering the History of the weather from seed time to Harvest.

There is an old proverb that *in England a dry Summer never begs its bread*, and there are others of the same import. Assertions can never become proverbial without an original foundation in Truth. I do not think that the effect of Seasons is as yet revolutionized; and it cannot be denied but that in consequence of almost ten weeks of very uncommonly hot and dry weather, the people in general, Farmers as well as others, relied on their good old Proverb and expected the whole a plentiful harvest, wherever the wheat had not suffered from the severity of the Winter. The *early* thrashing has not in general by any means answered to these very sanguine expectations, and if we consider the progress of the Vegetation of this year's crop the reasons will be easily understood.

The seed-time last year was very unfavourable to cold, wet, deep soils in general; much wheat was sown very late, on lands half drowned, and not half cleaned. So far, considerable failures might be expected; But I apprehend that a very ample set-off against all these failures may be found in the unprecedentedly great quantity of wheat which was sown on the dry lands; and

⁹ *Memorandum*, p 12. In a paper on the scarcity of 1800 drawn up by Warren Hastings, ex-Governor-General of Bengal, the influence of expectations on market price is repeatedly made. This paper is also at the Devon RO.

¹⁰ In the section immediately following the extract below, Beeke provides the first known description of a 'Giffen good'. See my note 'The Beeke good: A note on the origins of the Giffen good', forthcoming, *History of Political Economy*.

¹¹ The opinion of Thomas Tooke in his *History of Prices*, 1823, is worth noting as the better-known view of the scarcity of 1800:

The season of 1800, after a cold, backward spring, assumed rather a favourable aspect, the early part of the summer being dry and hot; but the promising appearances were soon changed into the dismal reality of renewed or continued scarcity. A small part only of the crops was got in before heavy and almost incessant rains

began. Of the wheat, that part which was secured in the southern districts of the island before the rains commenced, and therefore in good conditions, proved to be light, coarse, and unproductive: this was the quality of the grain generally. But the rains which came on in August caught a considerable portion of the wheat still in the fields, even in the home and some of the southern districts, and injured the whole of the crops in the northern parts of the island.

Bad, however, as were the crops in England, they were still worse in Scotland

For an account of the measures taken by the government during the scarcity of 1795-96, see W M Stern, 'The Bread Crisis in Britain 1795-96', *Economica*, May, 1964. The scarcity of 1800 had one good effect: it forced the government to call for a general census. M J Cullen, *The Statistical Movement in Early Victorian Britain*, New York, 1975, p 12.

especially after Turnips. This part of the crop being left in danger from the wet, being in general on land well manured by sheep, and well cleaned is I believe allowed everywhere to be very good.

Though in some of the cases before mentioned, I also found slugs and other reptiles, there were many spots in every county which were thin, yet this was far from being generally the case; and in some counties particularly where much Alarm has been excited, the complaint is that hopes have been disappointed which could not have been raised if the ground in general had not been sufficiently covered with Plants. I have often known the Wheat much more generally injured during the winter, when it has been forward, or what is technically called *Winter-proud* and has afterwards felt the effects of severe frost in the spring.

About Easter the appearance was far from bad, but afterwards, the ungenial weather in the month of May threatened almost a future famine. The month of May is one of the critical periods in the growth of Wheat, being the time when the ear is first formed within the sheaths of the surrounding leaves; though it is still some weeks afterwards that it shoots, or becomes visible to the eye. The future *length* of the ear depends very much more on the weather at the time of its formation than may be generally apprehended: and accordingly this year it was I think a common remark that the ears were short, though in most places numerous and full. If you examine ears of wheat as I have described, you will find that the lower part of the Rachys (to use a botanical term), that is, of the upper part of the stalk on each side of which the grain is freed is destitute of florets; And in *cold* summers, the florets in the upper part of it are barren. But the produce of a crop of wheat may be very considerable though the ears are short, because it depends chiefly on the number of fertile florets within each Calyse; or Chest, as in this Country it is principally

called. In general the corn is judged to yield a full average produce when each of these contains three grains excepting the terminating ones which seldom have more than two. Last year the ears in general were somewhat longer than this, but whole fields together had one side of the ear almost entirely barren, and the average number was seldom to be found; this year, even in Crops of which great Complaints have been made, the average number is at least as much exceeded, excepting on stiff clay lands, as at Mortimer, which were almost baked to brick. I have in my Parish a field of that sort which was badly killed and which, though good wheat land, the produce will not be two Quarters an acre.

From the first week in June to the second, and in many places the third, week in August no weather could be more favourable to the wheat. Great heat in the air with abundant moisture in the ground caused during the month of June a most luxuriant vegetation; the lateral shoots advanced more rapidly; and the crop was in general more even and erect (two very important circumstances) than I have known for several years.

The blossoming time of the whole crop, and also the kerning time of the early wheat was allowed without any contradiction to be the finest that could be wished for and certainly nothing happened to interpret the pleasing expectation occasioned by it till about the second or third week in August.

About that time, and not before, the blight of the straw made its appearance in many places, especially in the southern and Midland Counties (North of the Trent it is not complained of). I believe that those who have an opportunity of inquiring respecting former seasons will find that this blight usually succeeds to very hot and close weather, without wind, in the month of July, and abates somewhat of the general in the prospect of an abundant crop.

When it happens early, and before the grain is renned, or ceases to be milky, it is exceedingly injurious. The *number* of grains depends on the weather at the time of blossoming, but they become shrivelled and contain little flour when a blight comes on before they are sufficiently advanced towards ripeness.

But this year it was not at all complained of till *after* most of the wheat was already ripe, and for the greater part was already so much advanced as to require but little more aid from the circulation through the stalk. I went into Devonshire the first week in August, and heard nothing of it before I set out, and saw nothing of it on the road, unless on some high lands near Axminster, I was frequent in my inquiries afterwards; and the accounts of farmers themselves were uniformly good till about a fortnight afterwards when I found that the blight was very general in Cornwall, and that they were cutting their wheat as fast as possible. It is a fact well understood by practical farmers, that, if the wheat is cut as soon as the blight appears, though the grain shall be quite soft, and the straw yet green, yet the mischief is in great part prevented.

If this blight had really been so generally injurious the calamity would have been known much *sooner*; the price of wheat would not have fallen in August; the new wheat *could* not have been the fullest-bodied, fairest, and heaviest, that has been seen for some years in the markets. But these facts respecting it are not I believe anywhere questioned, so far as concerns the great bulk of this year's produce.

But the following observations will account for a great part of the present alarm.

It happens to most farmers from a very obvious necessity that the latest wheat in the barn is the *first* which must be thrashed. The Ricks are usually made during the busy time of the harvest, and the late wheat lies uppermost in the barn (unless a particular

arrangement is made for the sake of seed) and must be thrashed before the rest can be got.

This year the *late* wheat in the South of England was certainly in many places injured by the blights, and at the same time the straw, in general, was long. From a combination of these circumstances such wheat cannot be productive in proportion to the time which takes in thrashing. When the ground of the complaint is that the heap in the barn does not answer to the labour employed, the way to get at the truth is not to rest satisfied with being told that a days work only produces two or three bushels, but to ascertain the *comparative* quality of the crop which is thrashing; and the actual produce by the acre. I have known a very scanty crop thrashed at the rate of more than a sack a day when the straw has been short, and the grain slightly swelled by showers before cutting and my thrasher has just now told me that he has worked to procure two bushels a day in an instance where the produce was full four quarters an acre.

From all this information therefore, and from my own attentive observations, I must repeat my full persuasion that; throughout Great Britain collectively, there will at least prove an average crop, though the present thrashing may in some instances fall short of it.

It will not be so bad as might have been expected in May, neither will it be so abundant as the very fine weather afterwards, especially during the blossoming and kerning time, induced many sanguine persons to flatter themselves. It has undergone extreme vicissitudes, and the number of cases where it is either very bad or remarkably good are greater than usual; but will nearly balance one another.

As to the scanty supply of markets which lasted during a part of September, this must be attributed *exclusively* to the unprecedented

deficiency in last year's crop both in quantity and quality, so that the barns and graineries, of the farmers were almost totally exhausted.

The farmers in general wish to sow old seed, if they can procure it of good quality; but this year the old was too bad, and enough does not remain which is fit for their purpose.

The harvest usually lasts about six or seven weeks, (about an eighth part of the year) with so full employment that very little of any kind can be thrashed.

Of the wheat produced about a seventh or eighth part is again returned to the earth for the average produce may be estimated at between 20 and 24 bushels, and the average of seed used is rather less than three bushels.

The proportion of the barn room, and thrashing floors, to farms, is generally such as to require constant employment for almost ten weeks in making off the crop. The wheat generally requires about 6 or 7 days per acre for one man, or 4 when two thrash together, and, according to the usual proportion of buildings to farms of larger size, *cannot* with every exertion be conveniently thrashed by less than half a years labour.

Hardly any other new seed will be used this year; and, if all the seed were new, it would for the reasons just mentioned require between three and four weeks full labour to provide it, even if all the barns used for wheat were employed for that purpose only.

But the full labour I speak of could not begin this year till the first week in September. During the month of August the markets were very scantily supplied because the farmer's stores were generally exhausted. During the month of September they could not be fully supplied with bread (corn) because the whole exertion in thrashing would be largely adequate to the demand for seed, and hardly any old seed has this year been anywhere remaining.

Many farmers indeed are not able so to manage as to thrash the part of their crop which is fit for seed for the reasons which I have already mentioned; and they supply a scanty proportion of the bread corn. But, even to this time, I am assured that at least two thirds of the present abundant quantity brought to market is sold for seed.

In this county certainly, and as far as I can understand everywhere else excepting London the markets have been remarkably *full* ever since the beginning of October. And he who supposes that the corn could so soon have come in such quantities to market, if the crop had really been unproductive must be very little acquainted with the Rural Economy of this kingdom.

The present state of the markets in the country is, to me, a demonstration that the state of crop has been greatly misrepresented; I think the language of the farmers is very evidently changing; and I do not doubt but that the greater difficulties of the present year are already surmounted.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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and the history of economic thought. Within the history of economics his chief interest is in the inter-relationship between Anglicanism and British Economic Growth. He has published in *Econometrica*, *History of Political Economy* and other journals.

A R Wilkes completed his PhD at the University of

Reading in 1975. Following a period of teaching in Cornwall he is now Head of History at Normanton Freeston High School, West Yorkshire. His present research interests are a study of livestock prices in nineteenth-century England, and he is also undertaking a project for the Historical Association, introducing children to historical skills by using portraits of Queen Elizabeth I.