

Farmers' Organizations and Agricultural Depression in Lancashire, 1890-1900*

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THIS article attempts to trace the links between economic change and social movements by an examination of the growth and development of farmers' associations in Lancashire in the final decade of the nineteenth century. Any such attempt has to face squarely the work of T W Fletcher.¹ His challenge to orthodox accounts of agricultural depression in the period concerned forced a re-assessment of the depth and distribution of economic distress. Yet a reading of the contemporary press shows a very widespread belief in the existence of depression amongst Lancashire farmers which is not reflected in his work. This mismatch, it will be argued, was a result of a too narrow focus on purely economic considerations. Such a narrow focus cannot come to terms with the dimension of farmers' perceptions of their situation. They had not the benefit of hindsight bestowed on historians. Their views and actions were coloured by short-term movements in prices and by the fitting of their immediate experience into the wider framework of events at a national level. 'Depression', as defined by movements in prices, may well have been short lived or non-existent, but the beliefs of contemporaries as to what was happening were in many ways as important as what actually happened. Merely to show that Lancashire farmers escaped the worst of what afflicted their corn-growing brothers is inadequate; we have also to look at their

actions in the light of their perception of their situation. This article does not seek to challenge the broad theme of Fletcher's argument, but rather to build on his evidence to create a more rounded picture of the effect of economic change on the social structure of rural Lancashire.

I

Fletcher's work, published in the early 1960s, sought to challenge the orthodox account of agricultural depression in the late nineteenth century as encapsulated in the conclusions of Ernle: 'Since 1862 the tide of agricultural prosperity had ceased to flow; after 1874 it turned, and rapidly ebbed. A period of depression began which, with some fluctuations in severity, continued throughout the rest of the reign of Queen Victoria and beyond.'² Fletcher argued that this view gave too much weight to the experience of the corn-growing areas of south and east England, and too little to the pastoral, stock-rearing regions of the north and west. In particular, he demonstrated that the two Royal Commissions appointed to investigate the causes of depression were biased towards the corn growers. This was especially true of the 1882 Richmond Commission. Its members were dominated by landowners, 'all with large properties in the south and Midlands'. Of the 35 witnesses called, only one farmed under 100 acres, with 26 coming from the corn-growing counties.³ This association of the 'agricultural interest' with corn, Fletcher argued, had distorted our understanding of what was

* I should like to thank Ian Carter for his comments on an earlier draft of this article.

¹ T W Fletcher, 'The Great Depression of English Agriculture, 1873-1896', *Econ Hist Rev* (Second Series), XIII, 1960; 'Lancashire Livestock Farming during the Great Depression', *Ag Hist Rev*, IX, 1961, both reprinted in P. J. Perry (ed), *British Agriculture 1875-1914*, 1973.

² Lord Ernle, *English Farming Past and Present*, 6th edn, 1961, p 374.

³ Fletcher, 'Great Depression', pp 43-5.

really happening to English agriculture at the end of the nineteenth century. The key to such an understanding lay in the distinction between the experience of the livestock and the arable farmer. To the stock farmer, every fall in grain prices was a gain as 'it meant a reduction in the prices of their most important input — feed. Further, every fall in the price of bread to the consumer, other things being equal, stimulated the demand for livestock products'.⁴ Fletcher then turned to look in some detail at one particular region, the livestock area of Lancashire. His conclusion was

that no great depression of agriculture existed in Lancashire during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. On the contrary, the evidence indicates substantial prosperity until 1884 and the mitigation of any subsequent adverse impact from declining output prices by a relatively steeper fall in feed costs and by an expansion of output.⁵

The problem with this conclusion is that it is limited by its one-sided approach. Put simply, Fletcher attempted to demonstrate, through the collection and presentation of data on prices, that depression was slight or non-existent. Having reached this conclusion, it followed that complaints about depression were mistaken or irrelevant, and that it was not necessary to assess evidence of such complaints. If, as he argued, farmers in reality had little to complain about, then their organizations could be written off as those of a 'vociferous minority . . . well publicized by local newspapers whose editors tended to look at agriculture through eyes conditioned by the national press, which in turn reflected the view of the corn-growing interest'.⁶ It is symptomatic of this view that he referred to the Lancashire Tenant Farmers' Association as the major body in the county, with no mention of the Lancashire Federation of Farmers' Associations, a body with twice the membership. There was no attempt to explain the differences of policy between these bodies, and the main source quoted was

an article in the *Preston Guardian* for 10 December 1892, before many of the most important developments in the organization of Lancashire farmers.⁷ In slipping easily over the question of the organization of farmers Fletcher missed out what was possibly the most important development of the 1890s: the formation of farmers' organizations on a class basis, prompted by a perception that the prosperity which had been enjoyed up to that date was not certain to last. It is the relationship between these bodies and economic movements that is central to the discussion that follows. Prior to that discussion, however, an examination will be made of the economic situation in the arable south-west of the county. Fletcher excluded the area from his article, arguing that, 'As an example of pure arable farming that weathered the depression unchanged it merits separate treatment'.⁸

II

The agrarian economy of the south-west Lancashire plain rested on the fertility of its reclaimed moss land and the almost insatiable urban markets that surrounded it.⁹ Farms were generally small, and produced oats, hay, and potatoes for sale, keeping very little stock. On the large farms on the outskirts of Liverpool wheat was of importance, and its growers were hit by falling prices as much as were those in the south. One agrieved Speke farmer pointed out in 1886: 'the great fall in prices which vary from 25 to 33 per cent during *even* the last six years. If we begin with wheat which some few years ago was the *sheet anchor* of the Speke farmer, we find it has dropped 25 per cent'.¹⁰

⁷Ibid, note to p 99. Further inadequacies in Fletcher's selection and handling of evidence are discussed in A Mutch, *Rural Society in Lancashire 1840-1914*, unpubl PhD thesis, Univ of Manchester, 1980.

⁸Ibid, p 78.

⁹For descriptions of the area's farming see T W Fletcher, 'The Agrarian Revolution in Arable Lancashire', *Trans Lancashire and Cheshire Antiq Soc*, 72, 1962; A D Hall, *A Pilgrimage of British Farming 1910-1912*, 1913.

¹⁰Liverpool RO: 920SPE, Speke Papers, 18/12, D H Atherton to Miss Watt, 2 February 1886. (Emphasis in original.)

⁴Ibid, pp 40-1.

⁵Fletcher, 'Lancashire Livestock Farming', p 101.

⁶Ibid, pp 99-100.

This drop in prices was reflected in a fall in the acreage under wheat, from 12.82 per cent of the total area under cultivation in 1870 to 8.14 per cent by 1890.¹¹

Most farmers, however, grew little wheat, and indeed many were in reality market gardeners who concentrated on the intensive cultivation of vegetables with the help of family labour. The fall in price of hay and straw affected principally the middling farmers. For these farmers hay was the most important single crop, much of it being sold direct on contract to urban stables and dairies.¹² It averaged over £5 a ton at Manchester in the years 1870–79, but only topped this figure twice in the next 18 years.¹³ An important factor in this decline was the emergence of foreign competition after 1893. Prior to that date little foreign hay had entered the market, but the high prices ruling in 1893 (over £6 a ton) encouraged foreign suppliers. In 1892 imports of hay were 61,237 tons, the greatest supplier, of 19,403 tons, being Holland. The high prices saw a dramatic increase to 263,050 tons, of which over half came from Canada and the USA. By the end of May the following year 168,531 tons had already entered the country, with over 100,000 tons coming from the USA alone. In the 12 months to that date, total imports had reached 337,860 tons, or about 10 per cent of the total domestic hay crop.¹⁴ Much of this hay entered England through Liverpool, with John Patterson and Sons of Brunswick Street being established by 1895 as 'importers of foreign hay'.¹⁵ Of this foreign hay it was admitted, albeit grudgingly, that 'it smells well, although it looks rough, and that horses and cattle eat it readily, so it is a very formidable competitor in the market, especially when the hay is

shipped at a very cheap rate, and, of course, tends to keep down the price of the hay crop'.¹⁶ Foreign hay sold at between 50s and 70s a ton, and caused a fall in 1894 of about 50s a ton for home produced hay.¹⁷ This price cutting effect continued, with farmers complaining in 1899 that with Canadian hay selling at 50s, they could not grow it.¹⁸

There was a similar slump in the price of straw from the end of the 1870s. The late 1870s saw a boom in the demand for straw for paper-making as 'even our farm labourers and the working classes generally, who, in days gone by, usually took their pocket handkerchief for their purchases, now demand or expect their goods packed in neat brown paper parcels'. The resultant demand for straw would mean, predicted a speaker at the Liverpool Farmers' Club, that it would, 'in all probability . . . never be low in price'.¹⁹ Unfortunately, his optimism was ill-founded. The high price of straw sent paper manufacturers on the hunt for alternatives and the switch was made to wood pulp, so that by 1895 'the papermakers have, to a great extent, ceased to be customers for straw'.²⁰ Reflecting this, the price of straw fell from an average of over £4 a ton in the decade 1870–79 to £3 10s in 1880–89, and to just over £2 10s by the 1890s.²¹

An examination of the prices of hay and straw against their levels in 1870–74 shows that hay reached its lowest level in 1896, wheat and oat straw in 1895. The 1890s in general, apart from exceptionally high prices for hay in 1893 and for wheat straw in 1894, were years of depressed prices.²² In the late 1870s foreign competition had also begun to threaten growers of early potatoes. One dealer pointed out that Manchester 'can be supplied with new potatoes from Cheshire,

¹¹ Calculated from PRO MAF 68/247 and 68/1273, parish agricultural returns for Sefton and West Lancashire Rural District Councils, 1870 and 1890.

¹² S D Sheriff, 'Report on the Liverpool Prize Farm Competition', *JRASE*, 15, 1877, p 486; J Grundy, 'Allwood House Farm, Astley', in W G Hoskins (ed), *History from the Farm*, 1974, p 132.

¹³ See Table I.

¹⁴ W Fream, 'Our Imports of Hay', *JRASE*, 32, 1894, pp 397–401.

¹⁵ *Gore's Liverpool Directory*, 1895, p 1619.

¹⁶ *Ormskirk Advertiser*, 26 July 1894.

¹⁷ RC Agricultural Depression, *Evidence*, PP 1894, (c 7400), XVI, QQ 27261, 27316–8.

¹⁸ *Preston Herald*, 17 June 1899.

¹⁹ *Ormskirk Advertiser*, 21 February 1878.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 28 Feb 1895. Cf *Preston Herald*, 18 March 1899.

²¹ See tables II and III.

²² See tables I, II and III.

Cornwall, Jersey, etc, much cheaper than from our own district, while the quality is little inferior to our own'.²³ As potatoes began to appear from other countries such as Malta and Portugal, Ormskirk potatoes ceased to be quoted at the Manchester produce market. New markets were found in the towns of East Lancashire, and in supplying seed to overseas growers, but yet again the old certainties had been challenged and farmers had been forced to change their crops and marketing.²⁴

The impact of lower prices was softened by the fact that farmers did not depend on a single crop, but were able to market a wide range of produce in a number of readily accessible markets. Coupled with this was the widespread adoption of machinery to cut labour costs. Explaining the continued ability of farmers between Burscough and Southport to make money in 1895,

One man said that this was because of the large amount of labour saving machinery which had been introduced of late, and which had greatly reduced the expenditure on wages. He himself had recently purchased a corn sower, and for two or three years had had a self binder.²⁵

The 1890s also saw a widespread interest in the development of the potato digger, a machine which had been available to farmers in a technically efficient form since the late 1870s but which had been largely ignored by them.²⁶ By the turn of the century the newspapers were welcoming the end of 'depression', one sign of which was the increasing proportion of land being returned to wheat.²⁷

It is not argued here that the low prices of the 1890s constituted a 'great depression' in south-west Lancashire, but rather that they represented a sudden check to agricultural prosperity, which jolted farmers out of their

complacency, forced them to adopt new machinery, and replace their confidence with a fear that the drop in prices might prove permanent. A similar lack of confidence was to be found in the dairying region of East Lancashire, of which Fletcher observed that, 'some factor of factors in the years 1891-94 adversely affected farmers' expectations of profit' — the factors in this case being a drop in demand without a similar fall in costs.²⁸ It was the contrast with former years, and the uncertain future, that made Lancashire farmers feel that their industry was in the grip of depression.

This feeling was reinforced by information about the situation in the rest of the country, particularly that relayed back by Lancashire men who had taken advantage of the low rents offered by southern landowners, desperate to fill farms left vacant by bankrupt tenants. One such farmer was James Middlehurst who, after being evicted from his farm in Scarisbrick for his advocacy of tenant farmers' organization, moved to Great Chesterford in north Essex, which he found to be

a grand home for the sensible, the industrious, and the thrifty . . . No nobleman in the kingdom has a more beautiful home than I have, and in addition to this I challenge comparison for promise of a bumper crop with the best farm in Lancashire.²⁹

Lancashire farmers knew that such good fortune was the result of the bankruptcy of previous tenants, and they were determined not to suffer the same fate. From the experience of southern farmers they drew the lesson that immediate remedies were essential if their capital was not to be exhausted. As one Furness farmer argued, 'what was the use of working as they were doing and letting the landlords have all the money they had earned in former years when times were better in order to pay rent?'³⁰

²³ *Ormskirk Advertiser*, 24 July 1879. Cf RC Agriculture, Evidence, Q 27259.

²⁴ *Ormskirk Advertiser*, 23 Sept 1909.

²⁵ *Preston Guardian*, 20 April 1895.

²⁶ See A Mutch, 'The Mechanisation of the Harvest in South West Lancashire 1840-1914', *Ag Hist Rev*, 29, 2, 1981.

²⁷ *Ormskirk Advertiser* 4 June 1900 and *Barrow Herald* 5 Feb 1898; *Ormskirk Advertiser*, 6 May 1909.

²⁸ T W Fletcher, 'The Economic Development of Agriculture in East Lancashire 1870-1939', unpubl MSc thesis, Univ of Leeds, 1953, p 141.

²⁹ *Ormskirk Advertiser*, 2 Nov 1893. See also E Lorrain Smith, *Go East for a Farm; a study in Rural Migration*, Oxford, 1932, pp 20-1.

³⁰ *Ulverston News*, 3 Dec 1893. Cf *Agricultural Gazette*, 12 Dec 1893, p 543.

What was widespread in Lancashire in the early 1890s was a lack of confidence caused by a run of low prices. The fact that these low prices came after the widely reported experiences of farmers in the rest of the country put a sharper edge on the reaction of the county's farmers. The organizational forms which that reaction took have to be seen in the light of these factors.

III

There had been attempts to establish farmers' organizations before the 1890s, but the only body which met with any success was the Liverpool and District Farmers' Club, founded in 1872, and largely concerned with disputes with Liverpool Council over the running of the city's markets.³¹ For the rest of the county's farmers there were only the agricultural societies which, in the words of one critic, 'reflected only the honour and the glory side of farming, the swagger and show of it'.³² Their concern was limited to the annual show, and to the physical improvement of crops, land and stock. They were led by the county's landlords, who were anxious to 'avoid anything that had a tendency towards political discussion'.³³ As Lancashire farmers were staunch Free Traders they sought an immediate remedy in the reduction of rents, a strategy which would inevitably bring them into conflict with landowners.³⁴ Clearly the pursuit of such an aim required the establishment of new organizations independent of the landowners. The first attempt to found such an organization came at a meeting in Preston in 1892, at which was formed the Lancashire Federation of Farmers Associations (LFFA), claiming a membership of 600 drawn from Ormskirk, Bury, Clitheroe, Rossendale, the Fylde and Blackburn.³⁵ One of the first acts

of this new body was to call upon the Central Chamber of Agriculture to organize a national conference to discuss the depressed state of agriculture and possible remedies. However, the conference when held proved an enormous disappointment to the Lancashire delegates. Instead of discussing questions such as land tenure and rent deductions it was a carefully stage managed display of support for Protection and class harmony. As Mr Barlow of Haslingden complained, 'those who took some leading part in getting up this Conference had been somewhat deceived in the use made of it to promote the cry of protection'.³⁶

It was from this point that differences in the ranks of Lancashire farmers became clear. The LFFA remained wedded to a conciliatory approach towards landlords. They opposed the idea of a Land Court as this would 'alienate the sympathy any good landlord has for his tenant, and call forth any vindictive feeling which a bad landlord has for his tenant'.³⁷ They asserted 'an identity between the interests of the landowner, the agent and the tenant', and their appeals for rent reductions were couched in an appropriately apologetic style. The Blackburn Association, for example, did 'not conceive it as part of our duty to suggest what form, or to dictate to you as to such concessions as it may be in your power to make'. They would be grateful for 'such consideration as they deserve'. The circular ended with the veiled threat that others would not be so self-effacing: 'There is just the fear that unwise counsels may be allowed to prevail on some of our farmers' associations.' The answer would be 'a spontaneous, voluntary, and generous concession' which, they hastened to add, 'will not prejudice either the rights or interests of the landowner, nor will it diminish his security'.³⁸ Besides rent remissions or reductions, the specific solution that was pressed for was reform of the Agricultu-

³¹ *Ormskirk Advertiser*, 16 Feb 1872.

³² *Preston Guardian*, 11 Feb 1893.

³³ Lord Derby, *ibid.*, 3 Feb 1894.

³⁴ Fletcher, 'Lancashire Livestock Farming', p 99.

³⁵ *Agricultural Gazette*, 28 March 1892, p 305; RC Agriculture, Evidence, QQ 13952-3.

³⁶ *Agricultural Gazette*, 12 Dec 1892, p 543.

³⁷ RC Agriculture, Evidence, Q 13965.

³⁸ *Agricultural Gazette*, 3 Oct 1892, p 259.

ral Holdings Act, widely regarded as being inoperative in Lancashire due to the expense, the uncertain nature of its conditions, and the enormous counter-claims that landlords put in as soon as tenants claimed under the Act.

These demands, and the manner in which they were put, were far too limited and moderate for many farmers who were looking for political solutions. These farmers were attracted to the Lancashire Tenant Farmers Association and the other Lancashire branches of the National Federation of Tenant Farmers Clubs. This body was founded at the instigation of William Smith, Liberal MP for north Lancashire, at a conference in Chester in January 1893.³⁹ Despite its ambitious name, this body was in reality confined to the north-west of England, with the bulk of its membership being in Lancashire. Its distinguishing features were a stress on the need for tenant farmers to be organized in their own clubs, and the demand for judicially fixed rents.

The first point was made forcibly by a delegate at Chester who declared that it would be 'an insane thing to admit landlords to their counsels. They might as well ask colliery proprietors and agents to come into the ranks of their men'.⁴⁰ From this position of a conflict of interests between landlord and tenant flowed the Federation's demands for land tenure reform, expressed at their clearest in the Land Tenure (England) Bill which Smith introduced in 1892.⁴¹ The essential principle of this measure was absolute fixity of tenure, to be enforced by a Land Court. In popular terms the Federation demanded the '3 F's' — fixity of tenure, fair rents, and free sale of improvements — to which was sometimes added the fourth 'F' — freedom of cultivation, although in practice this last was already enjoyed by most Lancashire farmers. The relationship between landlord and tenant was to become a

purely commercial one, 'just like taking a shop', as one witness questioned by the 1894 Royal Commission put it.⁴² Further, it was argued that it was the farmer who added value to the land, and that he should benefit from the increased value. The ultimate aim was the creation of a class of owner farmers, and to this end the Federation demanded

the abolition of every law or custom which permits land to be left and protected from sale, and from being subdivided. That keeps it confined at all costs and hazards to one and the same family, when otherwise, by the conduct of the owner — his incapacity, or profligacy, or bankruptcy, or by the claims of family — it would be sold and divided, and become the property of farmers, who would henceforth have a stake in the country, and an incentive to patriotism, to husbandry, and high class farming.⁴³

Such were the formal policies of the farmers' organizations of Lancashire. However, it may be doubted as to how far the membership shared the exact opinions of their leaders, or held an intellectually coherent view of their problems. What they wanted were reductions in rent and improved security of tenure; and Wilson Fox noted in the course of his enquiries that in practice 'the views of the LTFA are not very different from those of the LFFA . . . namely that they desire greater security for capital invested in the land, more than any legislation tending to fix them upon the soil'.⁴⁴

It is difficult to assess the formal membership of farmers' organizations. In 1894 the LFFA claimed over 700 members, and the National Federation of Tenant Farmers Clubs a Lancashire membership of 1650 out of a total of 3310. Not included were bodies whose connections with either of these organizations were tenuous, such as the club at Ormskirk. These figures also did not include the club at Chorley, with 115 members, or a similar body at Leyland.⁴⁵ No figures were given for the membership of the

³⁹Ibid, 10 Jan 1893, p 58.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹The bill is reproduced in RC Agriculture, *Evidence*, Appendix A, XXVI, pp 440-3.

⁴²Ibid, Q 12615.

⁴³*Agricultural Gazette*, 30 Oct 1893, p 393.

⁴⁴RC Agriculture, *Report of the Assistant Commissioner, Mr Wilson-Fox, on Garstang*, PP 1894 (c 7334) XVI, pp 26-7.

⁴⁵Ibid, *Evidence*, QQ 1395, 9914, *Barrow News* 20 Jan 1894; *Preston Guardian*, 11 Feb 1893.

Liverpool and District Farmers Club, but it seems to have included most of those farming on the outskirts of Liverpool. On these figures, at least 15 per cent of the county's 15,926 farmers were members of an organization, and the true figure was probably well over 20 per cent.

The farmers' organizations appealed to a particular level of the county's farmers, and faced hostility on two fronts. On the one hand there were the large farmers, that 'small yet powerful minority of Lancashire farmers whose past accumulations had put them in such a position that they were practically independent of their farms'.⁴⁶ On the other hand, certain demands were bound to alienate small farmers, and in particular the demand for the abolition of distraint. One of the reasons for depression, it was argued, was the forcing up of rents by excessive competition, which was caused by landlords' willingness to let farms to men with too little capital, knowing that, as under the law of distraint they had preference over other creditors, their rent was secure. Abolition of this law would lessen competition for farms and so reduce rents, but it would also reduce the possibility of men with little capital taking farms.⁴⁷ In addition, many large and small farmers had the opportunity to take alternative courses to avoid the impact of depression so that, while there were representatives of both levels of farmer in the organizations, their demands reflected the fears and aspirations of the middling farmers, anxious not only to preserve their capital, but also to win status in rural society.

These demands have in turn to be related to broader movements in rural society, and in particular to attempts by farmers to enforce greater social separation. The concrete manifestation of this desire was the eviction over the course of the century of farm servants from the farmhouse in the

south-west of the county. One cause of this trend was that farmers wished to sell all their produce in the market, forcing labourers to buy their own food, a strategy which was made all the more attractive because 'those who board with the farmer live in a better style'.⁴⁸ The motive, however, was not purely financial. Masters were 'increasing the distance between themselves and their servants', a tendency which was found 'principally in the higher class of farmers'. By 1850, this commentator, himself a farmer, argued that 'the great body of farmers seem to care little about their servants, except to extract the greatest amount of labour from them'.⁴⁹ The result was that by 1871 the balance of the agricultural workforce in the south-west had swung irreversibly in favour of the day labourers. This move was accompanied by a withdrawal of farmers from those customs which involved obligations to their workers, such as the duty to supply eggs on 'Braggot Sunday'.⁵⁰ Even in those areas where farm servants remained an important part of the workforce a similar retreat from customary practices was being made by farmers. In Furness the practice of cottagers planting their potatoes in the farmer's field free of charge was ended in the late 1840s.⁵¹ Similarly, farmers' sons were withdrawn from the village school and sent to boarding school, to enter careers other than farming.⁵² The desire for greater social distance between themselves and their workers also led farmers to want their role in rural society to be regarded as important. It was they, many argued, who had transformed the face of the county while landlords consumed the increased value created by their improvements.

The growth of farmers' organizations in the 1890s was on one level a direct response to

⁴⁶ *Preston Guardian*, 2 May 1896.

⁴⁷ *Agricultural Gazette*, 2 Oct 1893, p 299; RC Agriculture, *Evidence*, QQ 14051-2, Report, p 27.

⁴⁸ William Rothwell, *Report of the Agriculture of the County of Lancaster*, Warrington, 1850, p 51.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 125-6.

⁵⁰ W Warburton, *Notes on Altcar Parish*, Liverpool, 1896, p 44.

⁵¹ *Preston Guardian*, 27 March 1897.

⁵² *Agricultural Gazette*, 24 Dec 1877.

immediate economic circumstances. Farmers located the drop in prices in the context of national events. Their demand was for relief in the form of rent reductions, a demand which necessitated the building of organizations independent of the traditional leadership of the landowners. On another level, however, the associations were an organizational crystallization of farmers' desire to share in the leadership of rural society, the culmination of deeper shifts in that society.

IV

The hostility of landlords to any organization of farmers indicated how seriously they took this threat to their authority. That authority was based on the creation of local communities, revolving round the country house, in which all had their place and attendant rights and duties. This local community was bound together by charity, which emphasized both the benevolence of the giver and the dependence of the recipient. Farmers' organizations threatened this system in two ways. They unified farmers across estate boundaries and so threatened to break down that local authority which landlords fostered. Thus Col. Wyatt, agent to the Earl of Sefton, refused to meet a delegation from the Liverpool and District Farmers Club to discuss possible rent reductions, but instead summoned one farmer from each township on the estate to a meeting at which he offered a 10 per cent return or a permanent reduction of 5 per cent.⁵³ If farmers were to be bargained with at all, it was to be within the confines of the estate. Organizations also threatened to replace the vertical links between landlord and farmer with horizontal links between farmers. As Wyatt complained, 'agitators and talkers in the ranks of agriculture seek to set tenants against landlords, and labourers against both, and draw a hard and fast line between them, whereas their interests are

identical, and mutual confidence is their greatest security'. His suggested remedy was 'to endeavour to interest the Government to suppress agitators, clubs, and talking assemblies'.⁵⁴ Many landlords opposed not only the clubs, but even local organizations. Lord Salisbury's agent was of the opinion that

it would be unwise to heat the subject of rents on any estate in a broad sense, but to deal (if & when necessary) with such individual cases as they come before you on its own merits, and therefore he does not intend to take any notice of any appeal from any club or body of tenants, even if a deputation approached him composed of Lord Salisbury's tenants.⁵⁵

A similar approach was adopted on the Speke estate. After the poor harvest of 1888 the agent proposed to the owner, Miss Watt, that she should inform the tenants that she intended 'meeting them at the next June rent, by this means you will prevent them from taking any steps to agitate the matter'.⁵⁶ This response was to a fear that tenants on the estate might act jointly; a more broadly based farmers' club was to be resisted even more. The pressures on the estate grew during the 1890s with the agent reporting gloomily in 1896 that 'the kindly feeling that used to exist between landlord and tenant is now a thing of the past, perhaps never to return'.⁵⁷ The estate's problems were compounded by the fact that it had two farms in hand, for which it was difficult to find tenants. Keeping these farms in hand proved expensive, but the estate preferred to incur this expense for longer than it need have done in order not to give in to what it saw as a 'conspiracy' on the part of members of farmers' clubs.⁵⁸ Even when it eventually reduced rents to let these farms, and so in turn was forced to reduce rents on the rest of the estate, the opportunity to attack the farmers' club was not to be passed up: 'it would do no harm', wrote Miss

⁵⁴ RC Agriculture, *Report*, pp 17, 46.

⁵⁵ Speke papers, 10/7, 29 Nov 1895, Graves to Watt.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 10/4, 24 Nov 1888, Graves to Watt.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 10/7, 24 May 1895, Graves to Watt.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 10/7, 14 May 1896, Graves to G Swift, 18 May 1896, Graves to Watt.

⁵³ *Ormskirk Advertiser*, 22 May 1890.

Watt, 'to let them know the action of the Farmers' Club had prevented our making a reduction about a year ago'.⁵⁹

The desire to maintain traditional relationships between landlord and tenant without the intervention of a class organization of farmers, however mild in policy, over-rode economic considerations on the Speke estate. To discourage such organization the estate was prepared to sustain possible loss and certain inconvenience by keeping farms in hand rather than giving in to the demands of 'outsiders'. The eventual concession of farmers' demands was made in such a way as to make the impact of farmers' organizations appear as minimal as possible. Thus, in the Ormskirk area, it was alleged, 'some landlords had reduced the rents and not demanded the tithes, but they did not like this to be known. On the rent day they had given a full receipt and then returned part of the money'.⁶⁰

Landowners were hostile to farmers organizing themselves because it broke with the traditional pattern in which they provided the leadership and solutions were based on their largesse. In the extreme they resorted to evictions or threats of eviction. The more subtle response was to bargain with farmers on terms set by the estate, and to attempt to prevent cross-estate organization, which threatened the desire of landlords to promote a localized focus for their tenants, a close community in which their authority was dominant. In these attempts economic considerations played a secondary role, as landlords were willing to sacrifice short-term economic gain for the preservation of the authority upon which depended their continuing to benefit from a situation of inequality. Their bargaining power, however, was seriously weakened by a shortage of applicants for farms and, as in the case of Speke, were ultimately forced to make concessions.

The seriousness with which landlords treated the claims of farmers' organizations indicated their importance. They were more than a mere reflex to economic conditions. Their existence was the crystallization of farmers' growing consciousness of constituting a class with interests different from those of their landlords. This awareness was sharpened by economic difficulties and given organizational form partly because of the desire of Liberals to wean farmers away from their allegiance to Conservatism. Whilst, however, most of the leading protagonists in the farmers' cause were Liberals, the extent to which they did more than give form to farmers' aspirations may be doubted. 'We do not seek the shifting ends of mere political parties', declared the LTFA. 'Our politics are the politics of the farm, and bear only on the permanent well-being of the tiller of the soil and the securing of a contented peasantry'.⁶¹ The organizations claimed members from all parties,⁶² and the LTFA took no part in the election of 1892 in order to ensure the unity of all farmers.⁶³ The Protectionist Liverpool and District Farmers Club, which had stood aloof from the wider movement, had come by 1895 to the same conclusion, i.e. that farmers needed to organize in their own interest, and it had accordingly sent questionnaires to all candidates asking their position on land tenure and other agricultural questions.⁶⁴ This convergence of farming opinion to stand firmly for organization as farmers was a mark of the bodies which survived into the twentieth century. Landlords were members of these organizations, but as *farmers*, not as patrons. In this way the Lancashire farmers' organizations of the 1890s prefigured the founding of the National Farmers Union in 1908, a body to which the Liverpool and District Farmers Club affiliated in 1910.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ *Agricultural Gazette*, 12 Sept 1892, p 244.

⁶² RC Agriculture, *Evidence*, Q 10250, *Barrow News*, 18 May 1895.

⁶³ *Preston Guardian*, 10 Aug 1895.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 1 Feb 1896.

⁶⁵ Museum of English Rural Life, Reading, NFU/1. General Council minutes, National Farmers Union, 6 December 1910.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 13/10, 29 Nov 1896, Watt to Graves.

⁶⁰ *Preston Guardian*, 3 March 1894.

V

The development of farmers' associations in Lancashire at the close of the nineteenth century was in part a response to economic factors. A drop in prices following years of prosperity led to fears about an uncertain future. These fears were reinforced by their location in the context of national developments. Because low prices came to Lancashire after the experience of farmers in others parts of the country the reaction of the county's farmers was sharpened. Of course, in reality farmers' fears were much exaggerated. The wide spread of produce and easy access to markets cushioned the impact of low prices as did the frequent adoption of machinery to cut wage costs. However, this does not mean that such fears should therefore be written off. As Perry argues, 'many farmers and landowners from all over Britain believed they were experiencing hard times whatever the objective reality of their position'.⁶⁶ It was such beliefs that shaped the course of farmers' reactions. From the livestock rearing area of Furness to the dairies of East Lancashire and the south-west arable plain, Lancashire farmers believed that their industry was in the grip of depression, and that immediate remedies were essential if they were not to be bankrupted like their southern counterparts. The only practical course open to them was to seek reductions in rent. Such a demand automatically brought them into conflict with the traditional leadership of the landed gentry and necessitated the building of new forms of organization.

This article has tried to argue however that Lancashire farmers' organizations were much more than a mere reflex to economic factors. They were rather the culmination of a particular phase in the development of Lancashire agriculture. The 'vociferous minority' in fact reflected wider shifts in rural society. Agricultural depression reinforced

TABLE I

Hay prices, Manchester, 1870-99
100: £4 16s 4d (1870-74)

1870	104	1880	100	1890	69
1871	90	1881	108	1891	68
1872	97	1882	105	1892	86
1873	92	1883	80	1893	129
1874	117	1884	85	1894	93
1875	168	1885	88	1895	68
1876	131	1886	82	1896	66
1877	123	1887	91	1897	76
1878	95	1888	112	1898	73
1879	109	1889	69	1899	66

TABLE 2

Wheat straw prices, Manchester, 1870-99
100: £3 18s 4d (1870-74)

1870	73	1880	86	1890	62
1871	117	1881	106	1891	67
1872	95	1882	112	1892	77
1873	103	1883	77	1893	74
1874	113	1884	81	1894	110
1875	129	1885	95	1895	49
1876	119	1886	69	1896	60
1877	153	1887	94	1897	81
1878	113	1888	115	1898	53
1879	104	1889	63	1899	36

TABLE 3

Oat straw prices, Manchester, 1870-99
100: £3 14s 2d (1870-74)

1870	118	1880	102	1890	62
1871	97	1881	102	1891	65
1872	100	1882	108	1892	79
1873	107	1883	76	1893	80
1874	131	1884	79	1894	97
1875	123	1885	91	1895	47
1876	153	1886	72	1896	56
1877	98	1887	92	1897	81
1878	95	1888	113	1898	58
1879	81	1889	63	1899	40

⁶⁶ P J Perry, *British Farming in the Great Depression*, Newton Abbot, 1974, p 183.

Figures taken from Wednesday and Friday reports of prices at Manchester Hay and Straw Market in the *Manchester Evening News* for July, August and September of each year.

the declining influence of the landed aristocracy in both national and local government.⁶⁷ Part of this decline was due to the assertion by farmers of their interests as a class as opposed to those of their landlords. The fragmentization of rural society in

Lancashire was to be carried still further by the strike of farm workers in the south-west of the county in 1913.⁶⁸ Seen in this context the low prices of the 1890s, and the widespread belief that these represented serious depression, hastened wider and deeper trends in rural society.

⁶⁷ F M L Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century*, 1963, pp 276-91.

⁶⁸ A F Mutch, *Lancashire Rural Society*, op cit.

Notes and Comments

WINTER CONFERENCE, 1982

The Winter Conference, on the theme 'Capitalism in the Countryside', was held jointly with the Historical Geography Research Group of the Institute of British Geographers on Saturday 4 December 1982 in the Institute of Historical Research, Senate House, London. The meeting was attended by 65 members, and heard papers presented by Dr Patricia Croot (Institute of Historical Research), 'The commercial attitudes of small farmers in Somerset in the seventeenth century'; Dr B A Holderness (University of East Anglia), 'Farm buildings: investment and depreciation, 1750-1870'; Mr T Reynolds (University of Loughborough), 'Marketing in nineteenth-century Lincolnshire'; and Dr K Tribe (University of Keele), 'Max Weber on Prussian agriculture'. The Society thanks Drs Baker and Phillips for organizing another very successful conference, and expresses its gratitude to the Director and staff of the Institute of Historical Research for providing accommodation for the conference.

SPRING CONFERENCE, 1983

The Society's Spring Conference will be held at Christ Church College, Canterbury, 11-13 April 1983. Dr D A Baker at Christ Church College will be acting as local conference secretary. Speakers will include Mr Jan Bieleman (Rijksarchief in de provincie Drenthe), Professor Donald McCloskey (University of Iowa), Sir John Habakkuk (Jesus College, Oxford), Dr John Beckett (University of Nottingham), Dr Peter Roebuck (New University of Ulster), and Mr John Bowers (University of Leeds). The programme and booking forms are inserted into this issue of the *Review*. Any enquiries about the Conference should be addressed to the Secretary.

ECONOMIC HISTORY SOCIETY CONFERENCE, 1983

Members are reminded that the Society is presenting a session to the Economic History Society Confer-

ence in Canterbury, on the morning of 9 April 1983. The programme consists of two discussions of pre-circulated papers on the themes of 'Agricultural Revolution', by Dr Mark Overton (University of Newcastle upon Tyne) and Dr Ted Collins (University of Reading), and 'Open Fields and Parliamentary Enclosures', by Dr Michael Turner (University of Hull) and Professor Donald McCloskey (University of Iowa). Members wishing to attend this Conference should write to Dr John Whyman, Economic History Society Conference Secretary, Rutherford College, The University of Kent at Canterbury, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NX.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, 1983

The 32nd Annual General Meeting of the Society will be held at 9.15 am on Tuesday 12 April 1983 at Christ Church College, Canterbury. Nomination forms for officers and members of the Executive Committee are inserted into this issue of the *Review*, and nominations should reach the Secretary *no later than* Tuesday 5 April 1983.

ASPECTS OF THE MEDIEVAL ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

A conference on 'Aspects of the Medieval Economy and Society' organized by the Historical Geography Research Group is to be held in Exeter, 1-3 July 1983. Speakers include Professor J A Raftis, Dr Martin Stephenson, Dr Kathy Biddick, Dr Harold Fox, Dr Bruce Campbell, Dr Larry Poos, Dr Richard Britnell, and Dr Maryanne Kowaleski. Members attending the conference are to be housed in the White Hart Hotel in Exeter, and enquiries about the conference should be addressed to Mr M C Cleary, Department of Geography, University of Exeter, Exeter, Devon EX4 4RJ.