

Rural Change in the Dutch Province of Drenthe in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries¹

By J BIELEMAN

DURING the Republic the state of Drenthe extended as far as the modern province of Drenthe does (an area of 266,278 hectares). At that time it was more or less a sovereign entity, and a member of the confederation of states which formed the Republic. The *Landschap*, as it was called, lay in the north-east of the Netherlands against the German border, and was surrounded by Groningen to the north, Friesland to the west, and Overijssel to the south (see map 1). It was a rather isolated region, surrounded by vast blanket bogs. Its geological structure had mainly been formed during the penultimate Ice Age when it was covered with an ice sheet stretching south from Scandinavia. It consisted mainly of a boulder clay plateau which was later on partly eroded by melting streams and then covered with an infertile layer of sand. During the Holocene, blanket bogs started growing and formed an important component of the natural landscape.

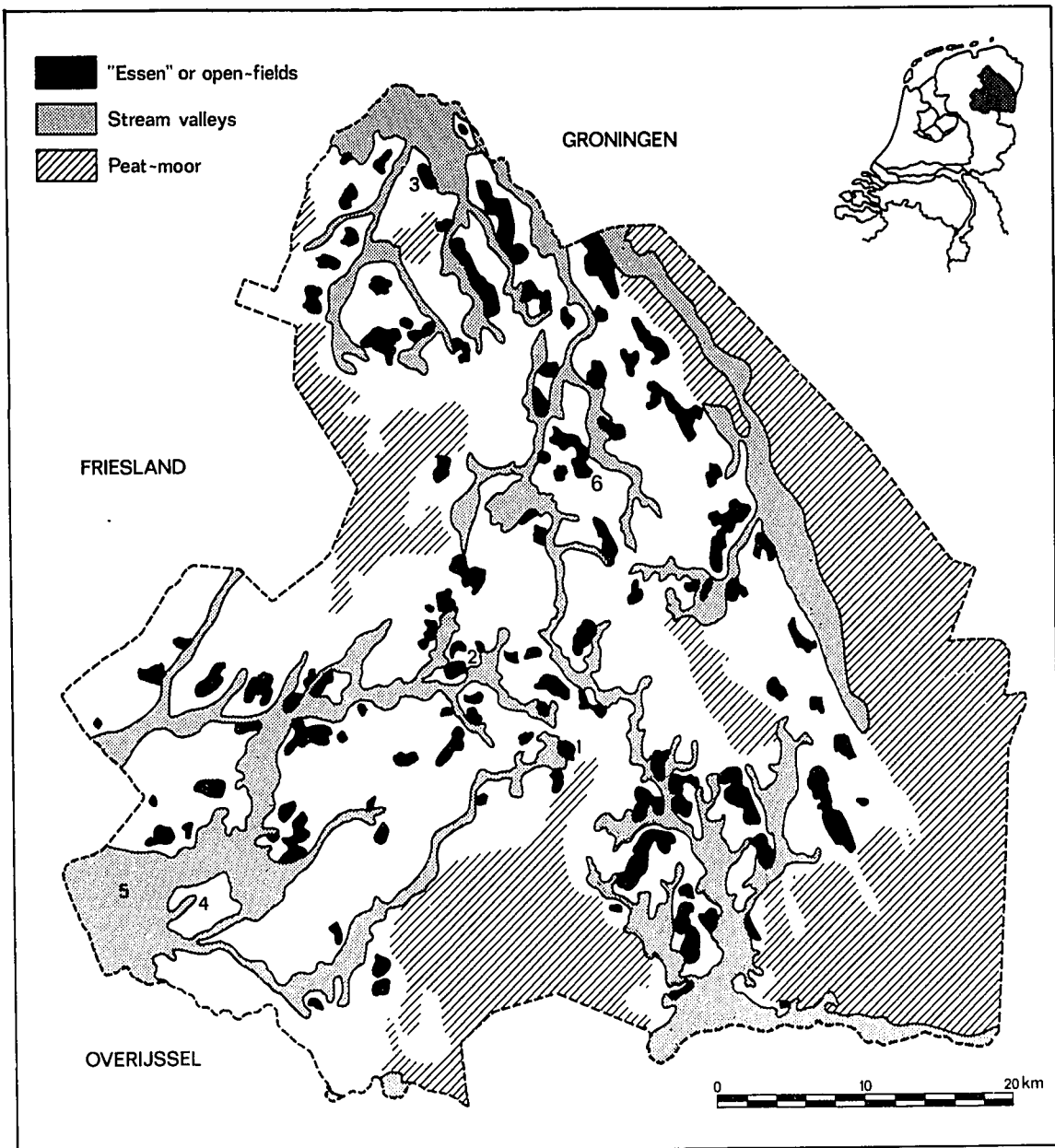
In the early seventeenth century the *Landschap* must have been an almost empty steppe of heath and blanket bogs over which small villages and hamlets were scattered like islands in an ocean. It is important to realize that it was a very sparsely populated area. There were no towns except the small town of Meppel in the south-west and the fortress of Coevorden in the south-east. Meppel had only

about 1000 inhabitants, Coevorden even fewer. The *Landschap* had thirty-six parishes and about 150 villages and hamlets, most of which had between ten and twenty farms. In 1630 Drenthe had about 22,000 inhabitants; no more than 8.3 people per km². Its population was about 1 per cent of the Dutch population at that time.² When studying aspects of its social-economic history we always have to keep these figures in the back of our mind. In seventeenth-century Drenthe there were three main types of settlement — the *esdorp* or open-field settlement, the *streekdorp* or linear settlement (found on the low-lying land at the edge of the plateau) and the *veenkolonie* or fen settlement. This paper is concerned mainly with open-field settlement, although some contrast with the linear settlements is made.

The main components of the *esdorp* settlements as can be seen on a detail of the first topographical map (1851/2) were: 1. the open fields or *essen*, 2. the meadows, on the silty and peaty soils beside the streams in the eroded parts of the plateau, 3. waste-lands. Then of course there were villages themselves (see map 2). The cadastral map for 1832 of the hamlets of Garminge and Balinge in the parish of Westerbork clearly shows the typical pattern of the open field with its fields and furlongs. The holdings of one farm were spread evenly over all the fields.

¹ This article is an adapted version of a paper given at the Spring Conference of the British Agricultural History Society held from 11 to 13 April, 1983. More on this subject will be published as a thesis called 'Agrarische ontwikkelingen op de Drentse zandgronden, 1600-1910. Een nieuwe visie op de oude landbouw' (Rural Change in Drenthe, 1600-1910: a new outlook on 'traditional' agriculture) which is in course of preparation.

² Faber *et al* (1965) estimated that the total number of inhabitants must have been about 1.4 to 1.6 million in 1600. A Faber, H K Roessingh, B H Slicher van Bath, A M van der Woude and H J van Xanten, 'Population changes and economic development in the Netherlands: a historical survey', *AAG Bijdragen*, 12, Wageningen, 1965, pp 47-113.



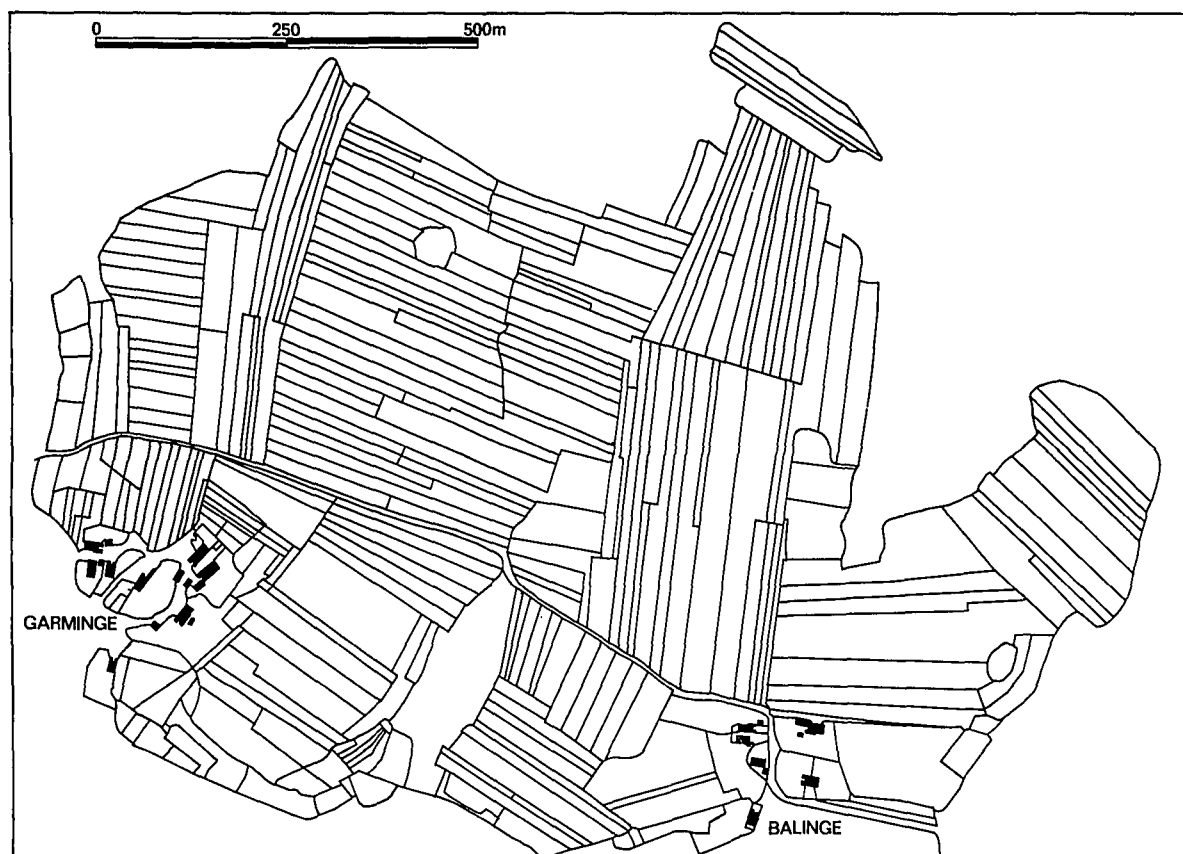
MAP I

Province of Drenthe. The map shows the most dominant features of the physical landscape of Drenthe. The open fields (indicated by black spots) are situated in close relation to the stream valleys. The places mentioned in the text are indicated by number

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------|
| 1 Garminge — Balinge | 4 Ruinerwold |
| 2 Beilen | 5 Nijeveen |
| 3 Peize | 6 Rolde |



Detail of sheet 17 of the first topographical map of the Netherlands (ca 1850) showing how the typical features of the *esdorpen* (open field) landscape survived into the nineteenth century



MAP 3

Small *essen* (open field) of the hamlets of Balinge and Garminge according to the first cadastral maps (1832). The holdings of each farm are equally scattered over the open field

I

Until recently there has been very little systematic research done on early farming or on the agricultural economy as a whole on the sandy soils of the Netherlands. Authors simply contented themselves with projecting some of the external aspects of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century farming back into former centuries. They assumed that what they saw as a primitive way of farming had been the same for centuries. Implicitly or explicitly they ignored the existence of dynamism in the old rural community, and so a picture emerged which was in fact no more than a caricature of the historical truth; a picture often painted in romantic colours. In the traditional view of agriculture in Drenthe, important features were that of the

shepherd with his flock of sheep on the heath (horned cattle played hardly any role according to the traditional view) and the continuous rye cultivation based on an intensive system of turf manuring (*plaggenbemesting*). There was supposed to be a stringent division between continuously cultivated arable land and pasture. The rural economy of Drenthe was presented as an almost closed, self-sufficient subsistence economy hardly related to any market. Recently however some authors like Roessingh have queried this traditional outlook.³ Examination of the records in the State Archives in Assen, the province's present capital, gave us a far more realistic

³ H K Roessingh, 'De veetelling van 1526 in het kwartier van Veluwe' (The Cattle Census of 1526 in the Veluwe Quarter of Gelderland), *A A G Bijdragen*, 22, Wageningen, 1979, pp 3-57.

view on farming and the rural community as it was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Much of our knowledge of agriculture in that period stems from sources which were put together for other than statistical reasons. Nevertheless they have proved to be useful and have helped us unveil a far more differentiated, and in many ways, a completely different picture of farming in Drenthé in the past. The research enabled us to solve problems like: the extent of agricultural land; the size and number of farms; the ratio between freeholders and tenants; the characteristics of the farming system; and the relation between cattle, sheep and field system.

In 1642 at the insistence of the States General of the Republic, the government of Drenthé started to make arrangements for a new system of taxation based on immovables, in addition to existing taxes. All over the *Landschap* surveyors were sent out to make records of everyone's property. These records give us a splendid view of agricultural land, and the size of the farms in every village and hamlet. By studying this material, we were able to calculate that by about 1650 Drenthé had approximately 15,460 ha or 5.8 per cent arable land. Besides this, there was a certain amount of land registered as privately owned meadow land. This was as much as three-quarters of the area of the arable land. But there must have been more meadow land still in common use. Many of the private meadows had been divided among the share-holding farmers during the first half of the seventeenth century due to improvement of the agrarian economy of Drenthé. Not all of the arable land however was actually ploughed. Some of it we find registered as fallow land. From a special record dated 1643 we deduced that over all the *Landschap* about 16 per cent of the arable land lay fallow. But there were of course important local differences. In some hamlets this percentage was as high or higher than 30 per cent or even more. A

contemporary notice tells us that a typical farm in the early seventeenth century consisted of 32 mudde (1 mudde = 0.27 ha) of arable land and twenty-four cows (including the young cattle). However tax-records show that around 1650 only about 22 per cent of farms were that size. The records also show that remarkable differences could exist between villages and hamlets in one and the same parish. The small farmers were often to be found in the churchvillages. Those who had hardly any land and only one or no horse were called *keuters* or cottagers. The shopkeepers and artisans were also found in these villages. In the satellite-like hamlets around the main villages the farms were mostly about 32 mudde. They had four horses and were usually described as *een vol bedrijf*, a complete farm.

Of course not all the farmers were freeholders. But herein lay the remarkable character of Drenthé compared to the neighbouring provinces Overijssel and Friesland. Drenthé had comparatively speaking many freeholders. A tax record of 1630 shows that in the *esdorpen* about 55 per cent of the farmers were freeholders. (Slicher van Bath found that in the adjoining province of Overijssel this was only about 10 per cent.)⁴ Of the remainder, 7 per cent of the farms were owned by the nobility and 5 per cent by the stewards' office of the government. These had formerly belonged to the monasteries and clergy. But these are only general figures. There were considerable differences between parishes and between the villages and hamlets within them. In the *streekdorpen*, in south-west Drenthé, the percentage of freeholders was even higher than in the *esdorpen*.

Apart from the early seventeenth-century notice indicating that twenty-four cows were held on a 32 mudde farm, we hardly have any information about live-

⁴ B H Slicher van Bath, *Een samenleving onder spanning*, Assen, 1957, pp 612-41.

stock on farms. It seemed almost impossible at first to reconstruct the relation between livestock and arable. But what we did have were records of revenues of about seven imposts paid in each parish over a period of about two centuries, and some of these were taxes on livestock. We decided to use the yield from these imposts as reflection of the data we most needed. It seemed to us that the important imposts were those on cattle, on sheep and on the exportation of bullocks, the so-called *uitdrift*. From the revenues of the impost on horned cattle, we deduced that during the first half of the seventeenth century the stock of horned cattle kept in the open field area must have been considerably larger than it was in the nineteenth century. When we calculated the yield of this impost per household, it was much higher in the open field villages than in the linear villages. This was rather remarkable as in the late nineteenth century the latter were by far the most important dairying regions. The seventeenth-century figure of twenty-four cows on a 32 mudde farm must have been a rather good example of the average number of cattle kept on a farm of that type.

But it was not only the revenues from the impost on horned cattle that were comparatively high in the open-field regions. The revenues from the impost on the exportation of cattle, the *uitdrift*, were also higher, and much higher than they were in some of the parishes on the lower fringes of the *Landschap*. This meant that cattle husbandry must have played a much more important role in the open-field farming in Drenthe than has until recently been assumed. But it was of a completely different nature from what we are used to nowadays or from what we know of the early twentieth century when the area of sandy soils had become an important dairy farming region. It appeared that in the first half of the seventeenth century, an important part of the horned cattle stock on the

open-field region must have consisted of young bullocks. These were sold at the age of two or three years and driven to Holland or elsewhere where they were fattened on the better pastures around the towns and sold for slaughter.

Although cattle was mainly grazed on heathland the open fields were also used. What was the open-field system in Drenthe during the seventeenth century like? Not all the arable land on the open fields was actually ploughed. By about 1643, 16 per cent of the open field lay fallow and in some parishes this was 30 per cent or higher. On the maps drawn by surveyors, we can see that these fallow lands were often to be found along the fringes of the open fields. It is obvious that in these cases a period of fallow was used to improve the quality of these marginal fields. In some other cases the fallow land is found on parts of the open fields which were enclosed. Here it was possible to keep cattle for grazing. In the codified law of Drenthe and in some local by-laws we find regulations concerning the enclosing arable land in the open field. The individual profit to one farmer enclosing some of his land was not allowed to hinder other farmers in ploughing their furlongs nor impair the interest of the whole community. Therefore it must not be forgotten that the open fields may have been less open than we thought.

But there were other ways in which farmers could graze their cattle on the open fields. In a number of local by-laws we find regulations concerning common grazing on the stubble. From these by-laws and other sources we tried to reconstruct how this common grazing worked and how it was linked with crop rotation. We came to the conclusion that apart from those sections of the open fields that were enclosed, they must have been divided into two parts of roughly equal size in which the arable strips of each holding were more or less equally apportioned. One year, one part

was meant for winter cropping and the other half for a spring crop, the next year they changed. This system allowed for common grazing on at least one half of the open fields after the winter crop had been harvested, that is from August to March. Apart from this we also know from other by-laws that pigs were allowed on the newly-sown winter crops if the ground was frozen and if they were properly cramped. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the winter crop was rye. Although the main spring crop was also rye, some buckwheat was also grown though probably not on a large scale. It is likely that the arable land on the open field was manured mainly by this method of crop rotation and common grazing. Moreover, we are inclined to assume that the system of turf manuring (which in general is believed to have been introduced during the later Middle Ages)⁵ played only a minor role in this period. But we will return to this later on. Common grazing, although it had undeniable advantages, on the other hand must have been one of the causes why average yields were very low. The farmers could not plough and harrow their lands just after the harvest. So weeds could not be fought adequately. In fact farmers chose to let these grow and spread, just for the benefit of common grazing. According to a contemporary notice in the early seventeenth century the yield ratio on the open fields in Drenthé must have been no more than 1:3. Only in very good years did it go up to 1:4. And we must remember that every fourth harvest was a bad harvest. So one can imagine that the farmer's income was dependent to a large extent on selling some of his cattle every year in the early spring.

The unsteadiness and vulnerability of farming in those days in a poor region like

Drenthé can also be seen from a graph showing the revenues from the impost on sheep (see Fig 1). This shows how often and to what extent the flocks were decimated by diseases like liver rot. In 1620 and 1621 for instance farmers were hit by bad harvests and wet weather and large numbers of their livestock died. In the eighteenth century there were the three successive cattle-plague epidemics which threw the agrarian community out of its balance.

II

What developments took place in the rural community and in farming during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and what were their possible causes? To answer this it is useful to separate endogenous factors from exogenous ones. One of the main endogenous factors we took into account was the growth of the population and its consequences for the structure of the rural communities. In 1630 Drenthé had about 22,000 inhabitants. By 1830 this number had grown to 63,868. But this was not linear growth. From 1630 until about 1740 we found a regular increase, but after that it remained static. It was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that there was a rise of the annual growth rate. In the nineteenth century Drenthé was the fastest growing province in the Netherlands. It seems that the increase of population in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, slow as it was, was mainly due to a growth outside agriculture. We can demonstrate this trend with the help of the records of a tax that was based on the number of horses per household. In the seventeenth century the four-horse farm was the most common type of farm in the open field region. By the early nineteenth century the number of this type of farm had decreased considerably, the two-horse farm being more usual, many of the traditional large farms had been divided and those farmers whose land remained whole

⁵ J. C. Pape, 'Plaggensoils in the Netherlands', *Geoderma; an international journal of soil science*,⁴ Amsterdam, 1970, pp 229-55. H. de Bakker, *Major soils and soil regions in the Netherlands*, The Hague, 1979, pp 39-54.

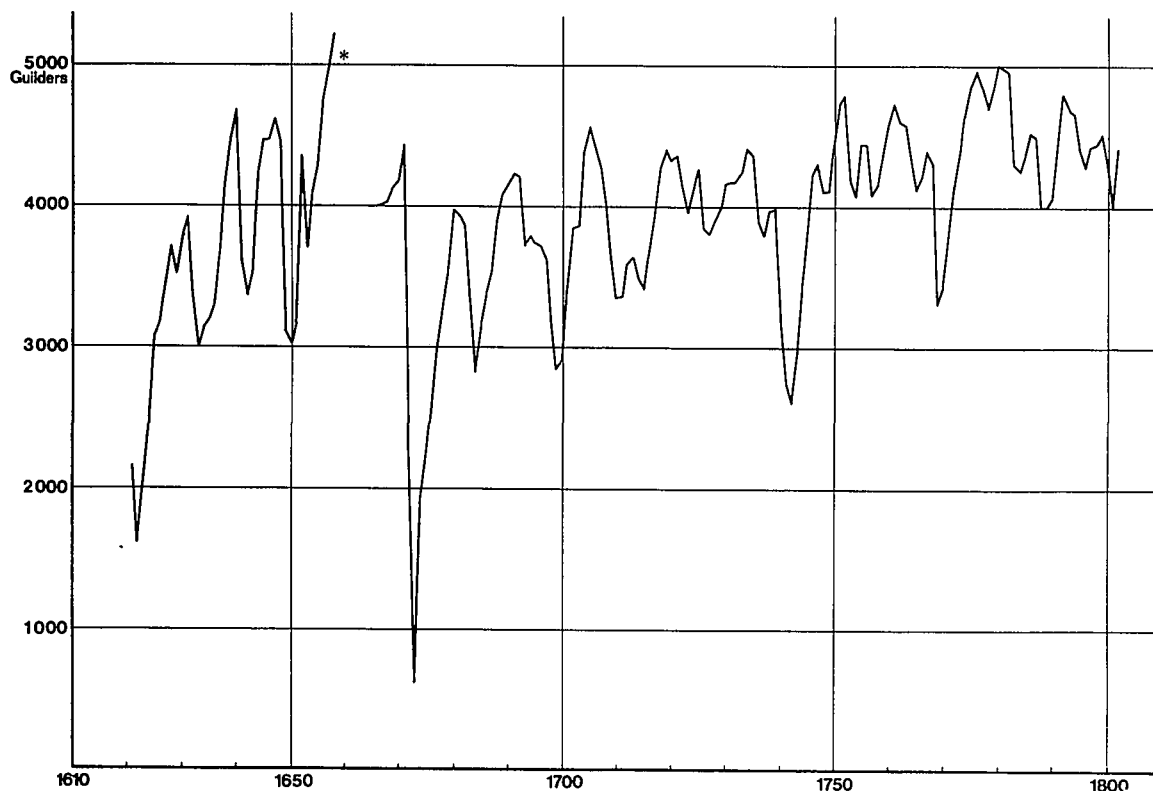


FIGURE I

Revenues of the impost on sheep (1621-1802). The graph shows to what extent the number of sheep depended on the loss of animals caused by diseases like liver rot

were a small minority amidst a great number of small farmers, shopkeepers and artisans. We also found that the population growth between 1672 and 1742 was mainly caused by the growth of the group comprising cottagers (*keuters*), shopkeepers and artisans. The figures in Table I, based on these tax-records, show this growth in fourteen villages and hamlets in the parish of Rolde in the central parts of the open-field region.

When we looked at the size of the farms in terms of their area, we found that the number of traditional 32 mudde farms in Drenthe had declined from 22 per cent to about 5 per cent in 1807, while the number of small farmers with half or less of this area had increased from 47 per cent to 62 per cent. Beside the population growth there were of course other factors that influenced the rural community, such as

TABLE I
Social structure of fourteen villages and hamlets in the parish of Rolde

A Number of larger farms classed by number of horses	Number of horses	
	1672	1804
four-horse farms	71	29
three-horse farms	9	13
two-horse farms	18	52
total	98 (100%)	94 (96%)
B Number of households (excluding large farmers) classed by occupation		
	1672	1804
shopkeepers and artisans	21	46
small farmers	9	72
poor	4	11
total	34 (100%)	129 (397%)
Total A + B	132 (100%)	223 (169%)

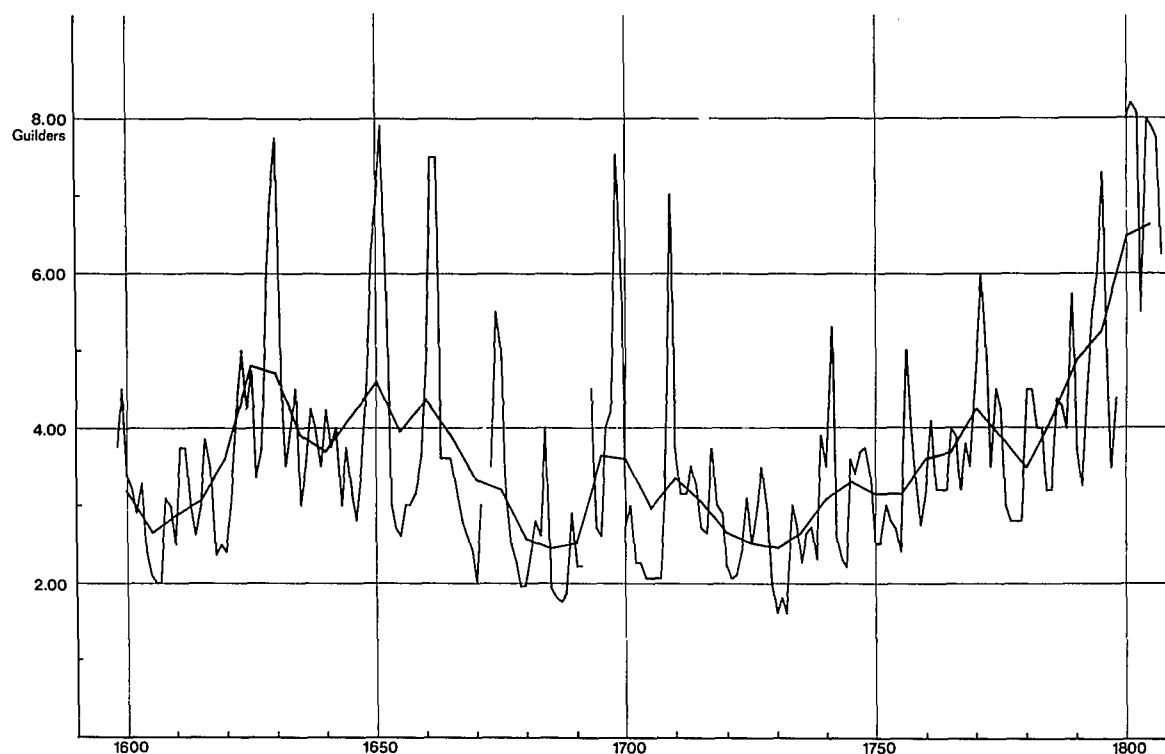


FIGURE 2

Annual prices of rye in Drenthe (1598-1807) in guilders per mudde (1 mudde = 0.91 hl) and the ten-year moving average

prices of agricultural products. We were lucky to find a series of rye prices in the accounts of the stewards' office of the government (see Fig 2). It was quite amazing to find how closely the prices in Drenthe followed those of Prussian rye on the corn exchange in Amsterdam. Farmers were indeed very dependent on the prices reached on this important international market. It also became clear how the period of depression between 1650 and 1750 affected the farmers. This long period was only interrupted by two short periods of recovery around the turn of the century during the Nine Years War (1688-97) and the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14). When prices were at their lowest the difference between the two price series was the greatest. This price lag was probably mainly caused by the cost of transport and the amount of grain that regions like Drenthe could produce.

Unfortunately we do not have reliable price series for meat or cattle; the ones we do have are not complete or are not usable for other reasons.

But farming results depend not only on prices but also on costs. And in the period we are talking about these costs of production were not constant. After the real-estate tax had been introduced in 1643, and especially after 1670, the government was forced to raise its rate. New taxes were introduced and others were doubled. All this happened because Drenthe had to contribute its share to the wars the Republic was fighting. But all these taxes placed a heavy burden on the farmers. Just after the turn of the century the tax burden became extremely heavy because of the very low corn prices.

Fig 3 shows the yield of five imposts and four other taxes, calculated in the equivalent quantity of rye according to

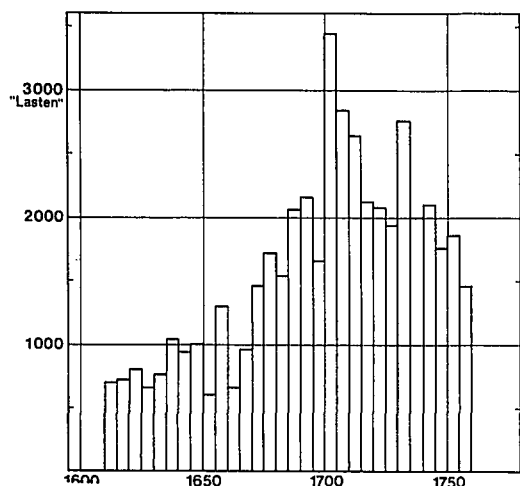


FIGURE 3
Increase of the tax burden in Drenthe in the period
1610-1759. Total yield of five imposts and four taxes
expressed in lasten (1 last = 30 hl); five-year moving
average

market prices. It shows that just after 1700 the actual tax burden was about three to four times higher than it had been during the first half of the seventeenth century. After 1750 the almost constant tax burden in money was compensated by increasing corn prices. Although it is still rather hypothetical we have reason to believe that the extreme burden of taxation was one of the forces that gradually changed the farming system in the open field region. We do not know exactly to what extent these taxes were a part of the total costs a farmer had to meet, but it seems plausible to assume that in order to cope with this heavy burden of taxes during a period of low prices, farmers were forced to increase the productivity of their farms. This could not be done by enlarging their farms. Between 1650 and 1750 the area of arable land increased by less than 4 per cent. The only way left to them to increase production was to intensify their farming system. As a result the number of cattle in the open field region slowly decreased while arable farming increased. By 1800 there were hardly any farms left that had twenty-four or more cows. Common grazing on the

stubble was abolished or limited. The folding of sheep behind hurdles for some nights after the harvest was the only thing that remained of the common grazing of all livestock. Farmers were now able to cultivate their arable land much better. They could plough and harrow their land more often and in doing so they could better control weeds. As a result yields increased. In the early seventeenth century the average yield ratio was about 1:3, but by the early nineteenth century we find yield ratios mentioned of about 1:6 or even 1:8 in good years. So within the framework of traditional farming, farmers had managed to double their average yields. This was also achieved by more intensive turf-manuring. Sods were cut from the waste and brought into byres as litter where they became mixed with the animal droppings. It was then taken to the fields. In the course of time, more and more sods were mixed with the manure. The farmers hoped that by bringing more vegetable humus to their fields they would get a better yield. By-laws of the hamlet of Anloo support this theory. In 1700 a farmer was allowed to cut two cartloads of sods per quarter share in the common land. Some thirty years later this number was raised to six, while in 1810 we hear complaints of farmers cutting twenty cartloads or more per quarter share.

During this process of intensification, farmers in the open-field region gradually managed to enlarge the comparative area under winter rye, which was their cash crop. At the same time buckwheat became more important, and they tentatively started growing spurry and turnips. In the early nineteenth century the main crops and their relative area were: winter rye 64 per cent; summer rye 10 per cent; barley 1 per cent; buckwheat (sand) 14 per cent; oats 5 per cent; potatoes 6 per cent.

How large was the cultivation of buckwheat on the moorlands within the total framework of the agriculture in Drenthe?

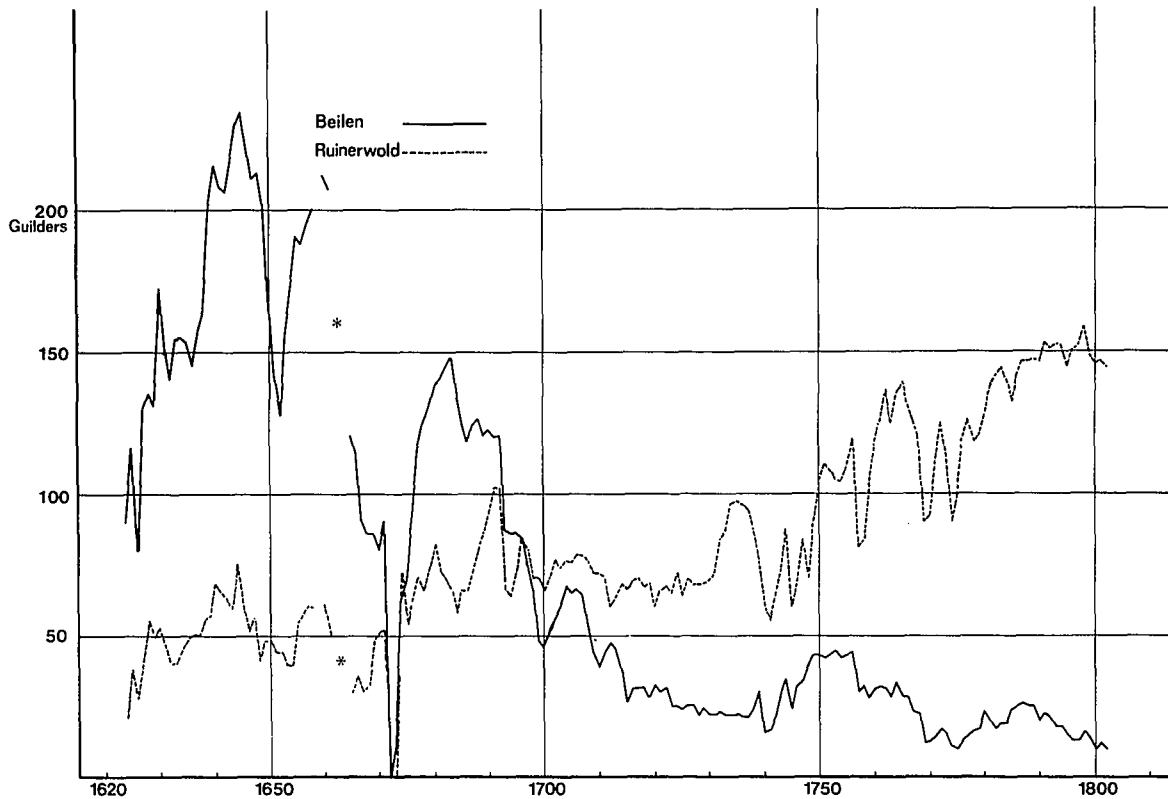


FIGURE 4

Export of cattle (mainly bullocks) and pigs based on the annual yield of the impost on the *uyt drift van ossen en verckens* (1624-1802) from the parishes of Beilen (open-field region) and Ruinerwold (linear village)

Although the method of cultivating moorland by draining, burning of the top layer and sowing buckwheat immediately after was already known by the beginning of the seventeenth century, it was probably not until the middle of the eighteenth century that this crop was sown on a larger scale. The culture of moorland buckwheat reached its peak in 1877. In 1850 the moorland buckwheat cultivation was 18.5 per cent of the total sown area compared to other main crops.

So far we have tried to show how the rural community in the open field region changed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and how the farming system gradually changed at the same time. These changes were caused to a great extent by a rise in production costs due to increased taxes. As a result, more emphasis was placed on the arable farming. Along the

lower fringes of the plateau however, especially in some of the linear villages, farmers were forced to intensify their pasture. By the beginning of the nineteenth century these regions had become important centres for dairy farming. In parishes like Ruinerwold and Nijeveen — both linear villages — the area of arable decreased between 1650 and 1832, while at the same time the number of horned cattle increased. In Nijeveen, the only village of which we have an early seventeenth-century record showing the number of horned cattle, this number increased from 357½ (younger cattle counted as half) in 1615 to 580½ in 1800; an increase of 62 per cent. At the same time the percentage of farms with six or more cows rose from 24 to 40 (see Table 2).

The different ways in which farming evolved in the open-field region on the one

TABLE 2
Number of farms in the linear village of Nijeveen in south-west Drenthe in 1615 and 1800, classed by number of cattle (younger cattle counting as half)

Number of cattle	Number of farms	
	1615	1800
1	3	13
2½	11	18
3-5½	48	27
6-10½	19	23
11-15½	1	12
16-20½	—	3
Total	82 (100%)	96 (117%)
Total number of cattle	357½ (100%)	580½ (162%)

hand and in the lower parts along the plateau on the other, can be seen in the figures. Fig 4 shows the yield of the impost on the exportation of cattle in the parish of

Beilen, in the open-field region, and in the linear village of Ruinerwold. It shows in what way the significance of the *uitdrift* decreased dramatically after 1660 in Beilen while in Ruinerwold it increased.

Fig 5 shows the decrease and increase of the impost on horned cattle and the total number of cattle in the same parishes. This last graph also shows the three periods when the cattle-plague infested the country to a great extent. Unfortunately we do not have any exact records showing the damage done by these epidemics in Drenthe. But by examining data concerning the neighbouring provinces we can assume that mortality among cattle must have been very high in the *Landschap* too.⁴

III

Although we have already mentioned the

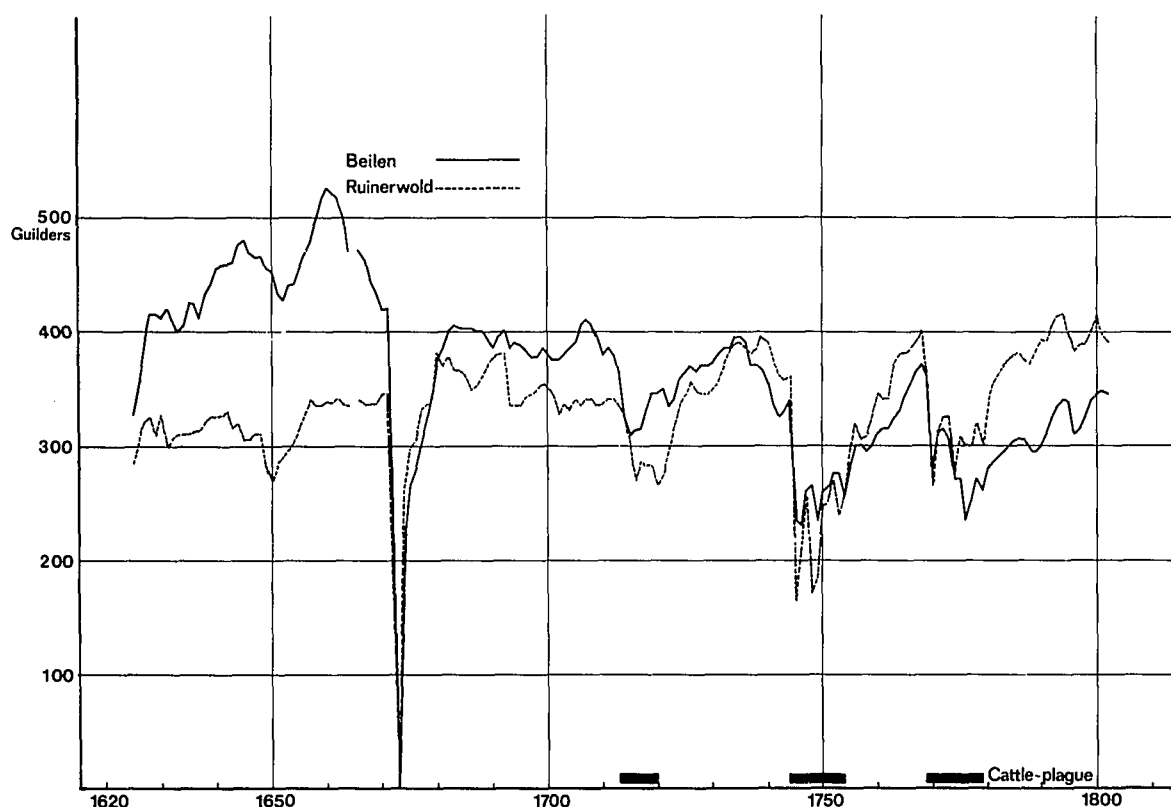


FIGURE 5

Horned cattle population in the parishes of Beilen (open-field region) and Ruinerwold (linear village) based on yield from the impost on horned cattle (1625-1802)

TABLE 3
Number of farms classed by number of cattle in March 1800

	1-3	4-6	Number of cattle			15	Total number of farms
			7-9	10-12	13-15		
Open-field villages							
— churchvillages	868	360	166	131	84	86	1695
— other than churchvillages	456	360	190	263	252	287	1808
Subtotal	1324	720	356	394	336	373	3503
Linear villages							
Group I	37	35	17	24	25	111	249
Group II	102	84	53	44	36	49	368
Drenthé	1827	1027	525	530	454	634	4997

differences in the social structure that could exist between the villages and hamlets in one and the same parish, we have been suggesting that the farming economy in the open-field region had an almost uniform character. However, in the north of Drenthé there were four parishes which deviated from this.

In these parishes the growing of hops was important. The parish of Peize, which had about eighty-seven households in 1630 was socio-economically almost completely dependent on the hop culture. More than half of the hop hills in north Drenthé were to be found in this village. Around the middle of the seventeenth century eighty-seven hop growers cultivated an average of 1050 hop hills per household. The four parishes together had about 161,400 hop hills. In Peize hops employed 14 per cent of arable land. Because of a decrease in beer consumption in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the cultivation of hops had almost vanished by the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Finally the way in which the process of

differentiation in agricultural pattern developed by the beginning of the nineteenth century can be seen from the figures of the cattle census held in March 1800.

These figures show the distribution of farms in classes according to the number of cattle that were kept. First it clearly shows the difference between the main villages in the parishes and the remaining hamlets in the open-field region. It shows to what extent the small farmers and cottagers dominated the social structure of these churchvillages. In these villages more than 50 per cent of those who kept cattle had no more than three cows (including calves and heifers). I have already mentioned that there were hardly any farms left in the open-field region with the traditional number of twenty-four cows. The other figures show to what extent cattle husbandry had developed in some of the linear villages like Ruinerwold (Group I). Other linear villages (Group II) show an almost similar pattern to that of the open field region as a whole.

ÉTUDES RURALES



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