

Hobby farming among the Birmingham bourgeoisie: the Cadburys and the Chamberlains on their suburban estates, c.1880–1914*

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Abstract

This article examines the farming activities conducted by members of the Cadbury and Chamberlain families on their suburban estates in Birmingham. A case study of Austen Chamberlain's farm at Highbury is based largely on family correspondence. It shows that the farm provided fresh produce for the household, and also supplied the local market. Although most of the Birmingham landed bourgeoisie engaged in agriculture primarily as a leisure occupation rather than as a commercial enterprise, Austen Chamberlain took scientific farming seriously, and it is suggested that Highbury might be more appropriately described as a 'model farm' than as a 'hobby farm'. The article also considers the views held by certain members of the Chamberlain and Cadbury families on contemporary issues of agrarian reform, and concludes that their often radical ideas reflected their commitment to progressive politics in general, rather than their personal experience of small-scale farming on their estates.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the terms 'hobby farm' and 'hobby farmer' were not in common currency until the 1960s. They can, however, be found in the specialist literature before then. The Report of the Astor-Rowntree Enquiry, published in 1946, included the category of 'hobby farmer' in a discussion of the proportion of their time that different categories of farmers devoted to supervision of their farms as opposed to manual labour. The hobby farmer was defined as a 'Man of independent means whose main interest in his farm is non-commercial and who delegates the day-to-day management to a bailiff or agent'. The estimated number of such farmers in England and Wales in 1938 was 7500; the average size of farm was 400 acres; and they employed an average of eight full-time workers.¹

Historians have often used terms such as 'hobby farm' in relation to non-commercial

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¹ *Mixed farming and muddled thinking. An analysis of current agricultural policy. A report of an enquiry organised by Viscount Astor and B. Seebom Rowntree* (1946), pp. 101–2, following the terminology of G. T. Garratt (1930).

part-time farming before 1914.² The usage is not entirely anachronistic, since some contemporaries, too, used similar terminology. Rider Haggard was told by an auctioneer in Leicester that, in spite of the generally depressed situation in agriculture, 'Land would still let, especially to small people and to persons of the manufacturing classes who farmed for a hobby'.³ The German architect and one-time cultural attaché at the German embassy in London, Hermann Muthesius (1861–1927), writing before the First World War, provided a particularly detailed account of the phenomenon:

Most owners of country properties ... do a little farming, which, though it may involve no more than cattle-rearing, requires a farmyard with cow-houses, pig-sties, a dairy, etc. Almost invariably too, there are enclosures for rearing poultry, which, should this be a particular hobby of the owner's, may assume considerable proportions. All these agricultural adjuncts have their own buildings, on which care is lavished in proportion as the owners regard farming as a hobby and the commercial viability of the operation is not the first consideration ... In fact these farms exist as show-places rather than as commercial undertakings. Their justification lies in the owner's desire to provide for all the needs of the household from his own land, and the pride he takes in doing so. Dairy-farms that produce only milk, butter and cheese are the commonest. The milk and cheese dairies are models of hygiene and are equipped with every modern appliance, which makes them a pleasure to visit. ... But the cow-houses and sheep-sheds too are luxuriously appointed.⁴

Rider Haggard and Muthesius did not specify the acreage of the hobby farms they mentioned, but an enquiry conducted in 1906 by the Board of Agriculture showed that, of the 28,403 farmers in Great Britain who stated that they did not farm for business purposes, only 2635 held more than 50 acres. Our source for this information does not use the term 'hobby farming', but rather its close equivalents, 'pleasure farming' and 'amateur farming'. Many of these farms must have been located in semi-urban localities: they were especially common in the Home Counties, with a fifth of farmers in Middlesex, a quarter of those in Surrey and half of those within the County of London describing themselves as pleasure farmers.⁵

Of these semi-urban hobby farms in the late nineteenth century, it is those in the Birmingham area that are best documented in the secondary literature, thanks to the encyclopaedic research of Phillada Ballard on the lifestyle of the city's upper middle class.⁶ Ballard notes that relatively few Birmingham businessmen acquired large country estates (defined here as over 1000 acres) as their permanent residences and adopted a 'county' lifestyle. Before 1880 there were not many men sufficiently wealthy to purchase such estates at a time when the cost of agricultural land

² See, for example, B. A. Holderness, 'The Victorian Farmer', in G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The Victorian Countryside* (2 vols, 1981), I, p. 229 ('hobby-farming'); E. J. T. Collins, 'Rural and agricultural change', in E. J. T. Collins (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, VII, 1850–1914 (2 vols, 2000), (i), pp. 123, 171 ('hobby farmers'); G. E. Mingay, 'The Farmer', in *ibid.*, p. 764 ('hobby-farming'); Collins, 'Conclusion', in *ibid.*, (ii), p. 2150 ('hobby farms').

³ H. Rider Haggard, *Rural England: being an*

account of agricultural and social researches carried out in the years 1901 and 1902 (2 vols, 1902), II, p. 267.

⁴ Hermann Muthesius, *The English House* (pb edition, 1987, an abridged translation of the second German edition of 1908–11), p. 102.

⁵ 'Pleasure Farming', *JRASE* 68 (1907), p. 86.

⁶ P. D. Ballard, 'A commercial and industrial elite: A study of Birmingham's upper middle class, 1780–1914' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, 2 vols, University of Reading, 1983).

was rising; and after 1880, although land prices declined during the agricultural depression, so too did rents and profits, making smaller suburban or semi-rural properties a safer investment. Such residences usually had grounds with enough space for recreational activities such as tennis, while secondary rural estates might be bought or leased for the weekend or holiday pursuit of country sports such as shooting and fishing.⁷ The suburban location of their principal residences meant that the upper middle classes of Birmingham could continue to engage in business and social activities in the city, while enjoying a lifestyle not dissimilar to that of the rural gentry.⁸ Thus while Birmingham businessmen followed a common English pattern in acquiring country residences as soon as they accumulated sufficient wealth to do so, their decision to live within commuting distance of the city centre meant that, unlike many industrialists in other districts, they did not make a clean break with urban life in order to adopt the pursuits of country gentlemen.⁹

As the urban sprawl of Birmingham extended ever outwards in the late nineteenth century, the upper middle classes began to move from suburbs located two to four miles from the city centre to new areas of settlement further afield, up to eight miles or more from the centre (Map 1). The improvement of public transport – trains, buses and trams – meant that it was possible to commute daily from these more far-flung suburbs to the central business districts. A number of prominent industrialists, including the members of the Cadbury and Chamberlain clans who will be the main focus of this study, moved from fashionable Edgbaston to the more outlying areas of Moseley, Moor Green and Northfield, in search of residences with larger grounds and a more rural atmosphere in which to raise their growing families. By the 1890s, however, speculative mass house-building was encroaching on these outer suburbs too.

When Joseph (Joe) Chamberlain's parents moved from London to Birmingham in 1866 and leased Moor Green Hall, his mother delighted in the 'then beautiful country which surrounded us'.¹⁰ Even in 1883, when Richard Cadbury left Edgbaston and leased Moseley Hall, to be closer to his new chocolate factory at Bournville, his children were greatly excited at 'the thought of living in the country'.¹¹ By the end of the decade, however, the prospect of new development in Moseley led Richard to plan a further move. 'Had it been merely a personal question they would have moved several miles out into the country', his daughter wrote, 'for the town was fast pushing its long arms into the direction of Moseley and King's Heath'. But because of her father's commitment to voluntary Sunday work in the 'Adult School' at Highgate, he bought land in Moor Green, not far from Moseley Hall and 'almost in the country', where he built Uffculme in 1891.¹² The following year, he purchased the neighbouring estate of the Henburys, which was being sold by G. F. Lyndon because of building development on the adjacent Grange Estate. Cadbury thereby prevented the

⁷ Ballard, 'Commercial and industrial elite', II, pp. 612–13, 948–9; see also J. V. Beckett, 'Agricultural landownership and estate management', in Collins (ed.), *Agrarian History*, VII (i), pp. 723–4.

⁸ Ballard, 'Commercial and industrial elite', I, p. 281.

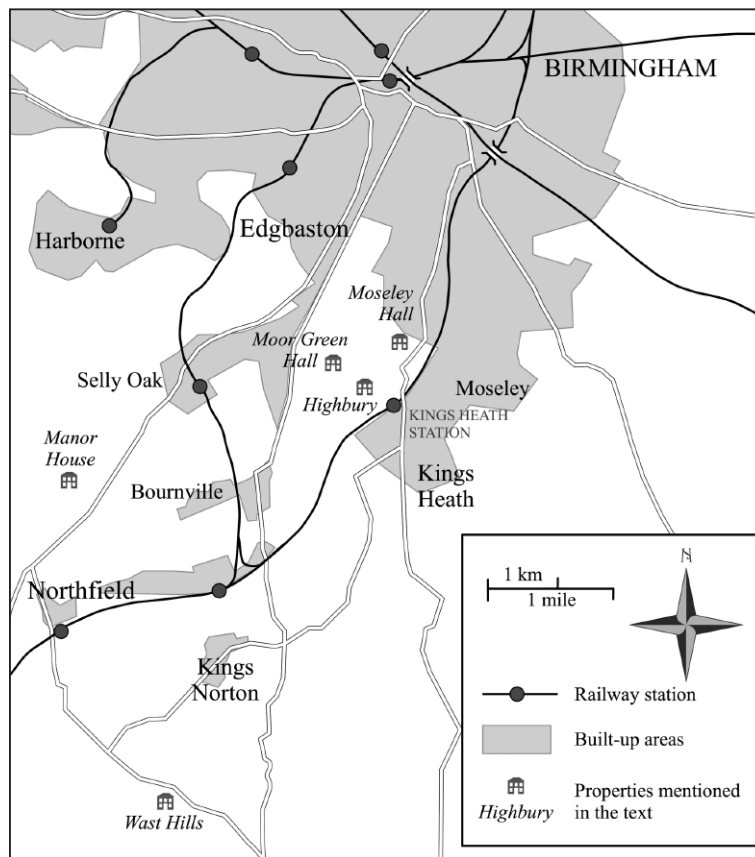
⁹ On the 'gentrification' of British industrialists through their purchase of country houses, see, for

example, Martin J. Wiener, *English culture and the decline of the industrial spirit, 1850–1980* (sec. edn, 2004), pp. 12–14, 137–8.

¹⁰ Ballard, 'Commercial and industrial elite', I, p. 354.

¹¹ Helen Cadbury Alexander, *Richard Cadbury of Birmingham* (1906), p. 213.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 245, 254.



MAP 1. South Birmingham,
c.1900.

Source: Based on the Ordnance Survey one inch to one mile map, Revised New Series (1902), Sheet 168.

Henburys land from falling into the hands of developers, and added about 65 acres to the original 13 acres of Uffculme.¹³

Uffculme bordered on Highbury, which Joe Chamberlain had built on land he purchased in 1878. He moved there from Edgbaston with his six motherless children in 1880, in order to be closer to his brother Arthur, who had taken over the lease of neighbouring Moor Green Hall on his father's death in 1874.¹⁴ The proximity of Highbury to Kings Heath railway station also made it convenient for Joe to travel to London while Parliament was in session. The Chamberlains considered Highbury to have a rural setting, even in the 1890s, as may be seen in Figure 1. Joe's elder son Austen commented to his half-brother Neville, perhaps with a touch of self-conscious irony, that he felt like a 'country gentleman' on his farm.¹⁵ In 1894, when the Chamberlains leased some of the Henburys estate from Richard Cadbury, Joe's third wife, Mary, wanted to retain the existing hedges, 'to preserve the countrified look and have the new land rather as farm than park. She is afraid the iron railings and planting will make it look

¹³ Phillada Ballard, *Highbury Park, Moseley, Birmingham. Historic Landscape Appraisal* (Birmingham City Council, 2009), pp. 23–4, 43.

¹⁴ Ballard, 'Commercial and industrial elite', II,

pp. 552–3.

¹⁵ Cadbury Research Library, Special Collections, University of Birmingham, AC5/3/4, Austen Chamberlain to Neville Chamberlain, 28 Apr. 1891.



FIGURE 1. The 'Dutch garden' at Highbury, 1903, with the house in the background and cows in the field in between.

Source: Photograph in the Chamberlain papers (C9/58), Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham.

suburban and like all the houses in Edgbaston which have a few fields.¹⁶ In 1895, however, when a 'building society' began to construct small houses on the Grange Estate, on the far side of the railway line that marked Highbury's new border, the Chamberlains were quick to express their indignation at the intrusion.¹⁷

In addition to Richard Cadbury's move to Moseley, other members of the Cadbury family moved from Edgbaston to more outlying parts of Birmingham. In 1881 Richard's younger brother George leased Woodbrooke, on the Bristol Road in Selly Oak, to be nearer to the factory in Bournville, and in 1894 he purchased The Manor House in Northfield, about a mile further out of town.¹⁸ On his marriage in 1902, Richard's second son, William Adlington Cadbury, made his home in Edgbaston, but soon afterwards he bought a farm south of Kings Norton, where he built a new house, West Hills. Until 1910 it was his home in the summer

¹⁶ NC1/14/73, Ethel to Neville, 19 Jan. 1894.

¹⁷ NC1/15/3/44, Hilda to Neville, 19 Feb. 1895; Joe to Mary, 6 Mar. 1895, pr. in J. L. Garvin, *The life of Joseph Chamberlain*, II, 1855–1895. *Disruption and Combat* (1933), pp. 626–7; AC5/3/104, Austen to Neville, 30 Mar. 1895; NC1/15/3/50, Hilda to Neville, 12 Apr. 1895; NC1/14/112, Ethel to Neville, 12 Apr. 1895; AC5/3/105,

Austen to Neville, 12 Apr. 1895. The 'building society' that developed the Grange Estate was the Freehold Land Society: see Ballard, *Highbury Park*, p. 23, n. 21. The new houses were the red-brick terraces that are still standing today.

¹⁸ A. G. Gardiner, *Life of George Cadbury* (1923), pp. 69, 128.

months only, but the purchase of his first car meant that he could live there all year round. Before moving permanently to Wast Hills, this energetic businessman sometimes bicycled out there at 5 a.m. from Edgbaston, and did an hour or more of mowing before going to Bournville for breakfast.¹⁹

The Chamberlain and Cadbury estates in Moseley, Moor Green and Northfield were large enough to permit such sports as tennis and croquet; and George Cadbury even had a seven-hole golf course laid out in the fields at The Manor House.²⁰ There were lakes and streams at Woodbrooke, The Manor House, Highbury and Moseley Hall, where the families and their friends could fish; and stables that catered for recreational horse-riding. These suburban estates were generally too small for shooting, although in January 1894 his sisters reported to Neville Chamberlain in great excitement that one of the gardeners had shot five wild duck in a row on a pool on their newly leased land.²¹ Neville and Austen Chamberlain did however shoot on sporting estates leased by friends and by members of their extended family;²² and their sisters Ida and Ethel tried their hand at hunting on country estates rented by their uncles Herbert and Walter Chamberlain.²³

Richard and George Cadbury, perhaps because of their Quaker principles, did not engage in field sports, but in 1897 they jointly purchased Wind's (or Wynd's) Point, in the Malvern Hills, as a leisure estate for their family and friends.²⁴ In 1900 three of George Cadbury's sons bought land on the Lickey Hills. Henry Tylor Cadbury, the third son, farmed there until he was recruited by his father to the management of the *Daily News* in 1907. His two older brothers, Edward and George jun., built country houses on the Lickeys, on sites close enough to Northfield for other members of the family to cycle out for the day to visit them at weekends. Richard Cadbury's elder son, Barrow, built a country house in the same area in 1907.²⁵

Small-scale farming was the country pursuit most regularly practised by Birmingham upper middle-class families. The tradition of farming on suburban estates went back to the late eighteenth century, when James Watt, the pioneer Birmingham industrialist, had a farmyard attached to his Heathfield Hall at Soho,²⁶ and it may have reflected a distinctively middle-class ethos that preferred to make productive use of even modest acreage, rather than leave it as ungrazed parkland. In the late nineteenth century, cows and other livestock were kept on small estates such as those which predominated in Edgbaston and the neighbouring suburb of Harborne. These estates, of between five and fifteen acres, typically had the farm buildings (cowshed, piggery and fowl pens) located in the fields rather than in a formal arrangement near the house. On estates of 15 to 100 acres the farm buildings were grouped to form a farmery, usually at some distance from the house. Small country estates of over 100 acres had separate home farms.²⁷ No sets of farm records have survived for the suburban estates, but Ballard's impression is that the activity was more recreational than commercial, part of the general social

¹⁹ W. E. Cossons (ed.), *William A. Cadbury, 1867–1957* (1958), pp. 31–4.

²⁰ Gardiner, *Life of George Cadbury*, p. 253.

²¹ NC1/14/70, Ethel to Neville, 4 Jan. 1894; NC1/13/2/11, Beatrice to Neville, 4 Jan. 1894.

²² Ballard, 'Commercial and industrial elite', I, p. 401.

²³ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 374–5, 401–2.

²⁴ Alexander, *Richard Cadbury*, pp. 282–6; Gardiner, *Life of George Cadbury*, pp. 257–8.

²⁵ Ballard, 'Commercial and industrial elite', I, p. 418; II, p. 593; Gardiner, *Life of George Cadbury*, p. 229.

²⁶ Ballard, 'Commercial and industrial elite', II, Plan 1, p. 706.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 913, 918.

status that attached to land ownership.²⁸ More practically, the farms provided the households with dairy products of a superior quality to those which were available commercially; and they supplied fresh produce for the large-scale entertaining that was engaged in by families such as the Cadburys and Chamberlains.²⁹

We know that farming was conducted by Arthur Chamberlain at Moor Green Hall and by his brother Joe at Highbury. Other members of the extended family, who had remained in Edgbaston or Harborne, kept small dairy herds there: Joe and Arthur's brother, Walter Chamberlain, at Harborne Hall; and five of Joe's brothers-in-law: William Kenrick at The Grove and Frederick Ryland at Baskerville House, both in Harborne; John Arthur Kenrick at Harborne House; Archibald Kenrick at Berrow Court, Edgbaston; and Charles Beale at Maple Bank, Edgbaston.³⁰ Richard Cadbury farmed both at Moseley Hall and at Uffculme,³¹ as did his brother George at Woodbrooke and The Manor House. George Cadbury's livestock at Woodbrooke is described in some detail in the diary of a visit paid to the estate by his mother-in-law, Gulielma Tylor, in May 1884. 'A playful young heifer greeted us in its own fashion', she wrote. '[T]here are plenty of sows with litters of pigs in the meadow, and in the farmyard a fine show of cocks, hens and chickens and also ducklings; a splendid mottled farm-horse "Darling" in one of the stables; three calves in the field; all looked so happy'. On both visits to the Woodbrooke farm which Gulielma describes, she encountered a Mrs Maldron, who appears to have been in charge of the dairy: 'she has a fine lot of poultry, 70 chickens besides some ducks; they rove about fields and yard and barns at their own free will and consequently thrive well. There are 17 cows, two died last year, valuable milkers'.³² At The Manor House, according to George Cadbury's grandson, John F. Crosfield, 'There was a dairy farm where the children could watch the milking, and turkeys which gobbled and scared the wits out of them'.³³ The farmland included a 6-acre field which was ploughed in October 1913 in order to grow turnips, presumably as fodder for the livestock.³⁴ At Wast Hills, William Adlington Cadbury improved the farm, 'so that clean milk might be provided for the family, and also for the Convalescent Home at Moseley Hall, which had been given to the City as a Children's Hospital after Richard Cadbury built Uffculme'.³⁵ Even after the First World War, the younger Cadburys were expected to continue the family tradition of dairy farming on their suburban estates. George Cadbury reported in 1919 that his eldest daughter Isabel and her husband had acquired Selly Wood, near Bournville: 'It is a lovely situation, with a fine garden, rockery, etc., and two fields, so that I think they will be keeping three cows'.³⁶

It is not clear how far the older generation of Cadburys and Chamberlains were personally involved in the management of their farms, or whether they were concerned with the

²⁸ Ibid., II, pp. 920–1. On this aspect of land purchases by businessmen, see also Beckett, 'Agricultural landownership', p. 723.

²⁹ Ballard, 'Commercial and Industrial elite', II, pp. 921–3.

³⁰ Ibid., II, p. 923.

³¹ On Moseley Hall, see Alexander, *Richard Cadbury*, p. 228. On Uffculme, see the photograph of cows in a field in *ibid.*, facing p. 256; also Ballard, *Highbury Park*,

p. 44, and a photograph from 1908 (Figure 25), p. 45.

³² John F. Crosfield, *A history of the Cadbury Family* (2 vols, 1985), II, pp. 444–5.

³³ Ibid., II, p. 463.

³⁴ George Cadbury, circular letter to his family, 22 Oct. 1913, pr. Gardiner, *Life of George Cadbury*, p. 261.

³⁵ Cossons, *William A. Cadbury*, p. 33.

³⁶ George Cadbury, circular letter to his family, 17 July 1919, pr. Gardiner, *Life of George Cadbury*, p. 265.

introduction of modern agricultural methods. At The Manor House, George Cadbury had a farm bailiff who was, according to the biographer of his second wife, 'completely illiterate but very efficient'.³⁷ Nevertheless, George's biographer tells us that he himself took his farming activities extremely seriously:

Not the least absorbing of his domestic concerns was his farm. He had always taken a very practical interest in agriculture, and both at Woodbrooke and the Manor carried on experimental farming. The home farm at the Manor developed into a considerable enterprise, and George Cadbury took hardly less interest in demonstrating the effect of good conditions on the health and productiveness of cattle than he did in the influence of environment on workpeople. His cattle sheds and pigsties were models of sanitation and commonsense as applied to farming, and he delighted to prove how profitable good methods could be made. For the farm was not a hobby. It, too, was an object lesson, and its value lay in conducting it on strict business principles.³⁸

This suggests that George Cadbury's main concern was to provide his livestock with good housing, in the interests of productivity, just as his model factory and model village at Bournville were designed to promote the productivity and profitability of the family chocolate firm, as much as the welfare of its employees. The term 'object lesson', which his biographer employs in order to describe George's attitude towards his farm, he also uses in relation to Cadbury's business methods, to denote examples of good practice that he hoped would be followed by others.³⁹ There is no indication, however, that George used modern technology or scientific methods on the farm: it was only during the First World War, in the light of the labour shortage it created, that he began to mechanize his farming operations. In June 1915 he wrote to his family:

We have made a start with our hay harvest; it is almost impossible to secure men to help so we are making as much use as we can of machinery. We have a machine which puts the hay in long ridges ready for loading into the cart, one man and a horse do more work in this way than four men would do.

He added: 'We have also bought a machine for milking cows – it milks four at a time, a man and a boy can in half an hour do the work that took three or four men one and a half hours, and it is very much cleaner than the old plan'.⁴⁰

The one member of the Birmingham upper middle class for whom we do have detailed evidence of his adoption of scientific farming methods, well before 1914, is Austen Chamberlain, Joe's elder son. In December 1894 Professor James Long, erstwhile Professor of Dairying at Cirencester, visited the Highbury farm and published a highly favourable account of the experience.⁴¹ He contrasted Austen's 'agricultural enthusiasm' and practical grasp of the subject with the 'dilettante practices' of other politicians who engaged in farming. Long had ascertained

³⁷ Richenda Scott, *Elizabeth Cadbury, 1858–1951* (1955), p. 56.

³⁸ Gardiner, *Life of George Cadbury*, pp. 254–5.

³⁹ See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 84, 93, 95, 125, 142, 144.

⁴⁰ George Cadbury, circular letter to his family, 23

June 1915, pr. Gardiner, *Life of George Cadbury*, p. 263.

⁴¹ For biographical information about Long, see his obituaries in *The Times* and *Manchester Guardian*, 3 Oct. 1931.

from his visit to Highbury that 'Mr. Chamberlain ... is not only well informed agriculturally, but working upon thoroughly sound and advanced lines'. The author further commented that, 'In the ordinary way where farming is taken up as a leisure occupation, even though it be based upon business principles, the custom of a district or a class is usually observed'. At Highbury, however, 'the custom outlined by the scientific observation and research of the past few years is followed'.⁴² The Chamberlain family correspondence enables us to provide a wide-ranging case study of Austen's farming activities at Highbury, and to judge how far they measured up to Professor Long's assessment of them.⁴³

I

Joe Chamberlain's original purchase of land for his Highbury mansion comprised 25 acres of grounds, which were landscaped by Edward Milner, a garden designer from Surrey. The landscape plan drawn up by Milner in 1879 did not indicate that any of the land was intended for agriculture, but shortly afterwards Joe bought an adjoining 7-acre piece of pasture, known as Spring Field or Spring Meadow, where he constructed farm buildings which are shown in the Ordnance Survey map of 1883/4.⁴⁴ We do not know much about the Chamberlains' farming activities at Highbury in the 1880s, but when Joe became engaged to Mary Endicott in 1888, he told her that the house and gardens on the estate occupied about 18 acres, while the fields, 'where the cows and horses pasture', comprised a further 12 acres.⁴⁵ Joe's own main passions in relation to the grounds at Highbury were the gardens and the extensive hothouses, especially those in which he cultivated his famous orchids.⁴⁶ We may perhaps be safe in assuming that his attitude to the farm reflected what James Long described as 'the custom of a district or a class', and that the livestock was managed by the estate workers, with Joe himself performing only a broadly supervisory role.

Early in 1888 Austen Chamberlain returned to England after spending a year in Germany, where he had extended his practical knowledge of foreign affairs, as part of the education in statesmanship that his father designed for him.⁴⁷ On his return, he was adopted as the prospective Liberal Unionist parliamentary candidate for Hawick, in the Scottish Borders. Although he conscientiously nursed the constituency, making regular visits to Scotland, Austen had sufficient time on his hands to devote to the farm at Highbury, which Joe seems to have entrusted to him soon after his homecoming. It was probably at this time, too, that he began the serious study of agriculture for which he was later to be praised by

⁴² Professor [James] Long, 'Mr. Austen Chamberlain, MP, as a farmer', *The Rural World*, 6 (314), 21 Dec. 1894, p. 911. The descriptive part of his article was summarized in *The Times*: 'Mr. Austen Chamberlain as a farmer', *The Times*, 20 Dec. 1894, p. 10.

⁴³ A particularly rich source of information about the farm is provided by the regular letters that his siblings wrote to Neville between 1891 and 1897, when he was working on the family's sisal plantation on Andros in the Bahamas. Ballard made only limited use of the Chamberlain papers for her discussion of the farm:

'Commercial and industrial elite', II, pp. 922–3; Ballard, *Highbury Park*, pp. 34–40, 48.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 24–42.

⁴⁵ JC28A/1/25, Joe to Mary, 31 May 1888.

⁴⁶ Phillada Ballard, "Rus in Urbe": Joseph Chamberlain's Gardens at Highbury, Moor Green Birmingham, 1879–1914', *Garden Hist.* 14 (1986), pp. 61–76.

⁴⁷ For Austen's early life and political career, see Sir Charles Petrie, Bt., *The Life and Letters of the Right Hon. Sir Austen Chamberlain K.G., P.C., M.P.*, (2 vols, 1939–40), I, chs.1–2.

James Long.⁴⁸ In 1892 a by-election arose in the East Worcestershire constituency, in which Highbury was situated. Austen was released by Hawick, and adopted as their candidate by the Liberal Unionists in his home constituency. He was returned unopposed in the by-election in March, and re-elected by a majority of more than two to one in the General Election of July 1892. In the parliament of 1892–5 he served as Junior Whip to the Liberal Unionist group, which was then in opposition to the government; but he evidently still had adequate leisure for his farming activities. In 1894 these activities were significantly extended when Joe Chamberlain leased about 42 acres of the western part of the former Henburys estate from Richard Cadbury. This was mostly pasture land, but it also included an 8-acre arable field in the south-eastern corner.⁴⁹ Thus at the beginning of 1894 the entire Highbury estate comprised over 70 acres, of which the house and gardens occupied about 18 acres; the meadowland, around 46 acres; and the arable field, eight acres.

There is evidence of Austen's 'enthusiasm' for the farm even before 1894. His eldest sister, Beatrice, told Neville in December 1893 that she and other members of the family had agreed to buy Christmas cards depicting pigs for Austen, 'who is infatuated about his pigs'.⁵⁰ In early 1894 his enthusiasm seems mainly to have been aroused by the acquisition of the Henburys land and the prospects it provided for re-landscaping the Highbury grounds. Austen himself wrote to Neville: 'Linden's [sic] land is most exciting and interesting'.⁵¹ Beatrice reported that Austen had been lured out to ride and walk by 'the fascination of the new fields';⁵² and Hilda, that Austen had 'new land fever'.⁵³ Ethel, however, implied that Austen's enthusiasm was for agricultural pursuits more broadly, when she wrote that her brother 'cannot exist long without the farm'.⁵⁴ In May 1895 Hilda reported that Austen was spending the weekend at Highbury because he had to make a speech somewhere in Worcestershire on the Friday night, 'and is going to spend Saturday and Sunday at his dear farm. I say this advisedly for Highbury [presumably, the house and gardens] is nothing and the farm everything to him nowadays'.⁵⁵

Of Austen's siblings, it was Ethel, the youngest, who took the greatest interest in the farm. When Austen was in the Bahamas visiting Neville in the autumn of 1892, Ethel was delegated to manage the farm and keep the accounts in his absence, although Beatrice was concerned that the responsibility for 'so many cows' was too heavy for her.⁵⁶ Ethel reportedly kept the books 'most conscientiously', and was 'hugely important and serious over the farm': Beatrice told Austen that their sister was even touchier than he was 'over the slightest criticism of any farm production'.⁵⁷ Until her marriage in 1900, Ethel had the primary responsibility for poultry-rearing on the Highbury farm.

⁴⁸ Austen had read at least one of James Long's own practical manuals on farming: in a letter to his step-mother, in relation to milk yields, he wrote that, 'Prof. Long in his book speaks of 600 [gallons per cow per year] as a fair average'. Austen to Mary, 19 Feb. 1891, pr. in Petrie, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 40.

⁴⁹ Ballard, *Highbury Park*, p. 43.

⁵⁰ NC1/13/2/9, Beatrice to Neville, 16 Dec. 1893.

⁵¹ AC5/3/70, Austen to Neville, 5 Jan. 1894. See too

his comment later in the month, also in relation to the new land: 'I find the whole thing most interesting and exciting': Austen to Neville, 25 Jan. 1894, AC5/3/72.

⁵² NC1/13/2/14, Beatrice to Neville, 26 Jan. 1894.

⁵³ NC1/15/3/7, Hilda to Neville, 14 Feb. 1894.

⁵⁴ NC1/14/76, Ethel to Neville, 16 Feb. 1894.

⁵⁵ NC1/15/3/53, Hilda to Neville, 2 May 1895.

⁵⁶ BC2/1/71, Beatrice to Neville, 13 Dec. 1892.

⁵⁷ BC2/1/66, Beatrice to Austen, 6 Nov. 1892.

Although the account- and record-books for the Highbury farm have not survived,⁵⁸ the family correspondence does provide an indication of their contents, and shows that they included figures for production as well as income and expenditure. Austen wrote to Mary in February 1891,

I have spent the morning making up farm statistics. Here are some results:

Amount of milk used by household during the year (as milk, cream, or butter), 4,500 gallons! Eggs consumed, 6,000. Average yield of milk per cow, 760 gallons. Last year it was 725 ...

Bridget has just been sold for £16 5s (Between ourselves we only gave £16 for her!). I have therefore now only five cows, one heifer, which will have her first calf this year, one yearling, and two very young calves, one of which is pure Jersey and the other is the calf of my Ayrshire ...

Thus at the end of this year we shall have six cows in milk if all goes well.⁵⁹

The siblings regularly reported to Neville about the buying and selling of cows, and the prices that had been paid or charged for them. When Austen was in the Bahamas in 1892, Ethel's letters to him included detailed information about the purchase of cows, as well as butter production, milk yields, the birth of calves, and the slaughter of sheep and geese.⁶⁰ The numbers of lambs born each spring were often recorded in family correspondence: in 1895, for example, the birth of 39 lambs to the first 20 of their 31 ewes was reported not only to Neville by both Austen and Beatrice, but also by Joe to Mary, who was then on the Riviera.⁶¹ Ethel in her letters to Neville frequently mentioned the number of piglets in the latest litter, as well as noting the weekly egg production of her hens.

The main aim of the Chamberlains' farming activity was to supply the consumption needs of the household – the family and their employees both at Highbury and in their London house (in 1889 butter and cream was delivered daily from Highbury to 40 Prince's Gardens).⁶² But meeting the demand of the household (which included provisioning their often extravagant entertainments) had to be balanced against the availability of fodder for the livestock. The cows competed for pasture with the Chamberlains' riding- and carriage-horses, which were kept in the stables to the north of the Highbury mansion house, and they also had to compete with the horses for hay. In February 1891, however, Austen wrote to Mary about 'friction' over the hay for the horses: 'Ours is not good enough really and, the land being what it is, cannot be made good enough. The horses waste perhaps a third of what is given them'. He proposed 'to give up pretending to supply the stables', to make only what he needed for the cows, and to keep more cows.⁶³ This suggests that better-quality hay for the stables was then bought in, while the dairy herd was gradually expanded to make efficient use of the additional Highbury hay

⁵⁸ Ballard, *Highbury Park*, p. 26.

⁵⁹ Austen to Mary, 19 Feb. 1891, pr. Petrie, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 40.

⁶⁰ NC1/14/155-7, Ethel to Austen, 9-11 Oct., 18 Oct. and 7-8 Nov. 1892.

⁶¹ AC5/3/101, 103, Austen to Neville, 1 Mar. and 21 Mar. 1895; NC1/13/2/60, Beatrice to Neville, 23 Mar.

1895; Joe to Mary, 7 Mar. 1895, pr. in Garvin, *Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, II, p. 627.

⁶² Diana Whitehill Laing, *Mistress of Herself* [a biography of Mary Endicott Chamberlain] (1965), p. 76.

⁶³ Austen to Mary, 19 Feb. 1891, pr. Petrie, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 40.

that was thus made available to them.⁶⁴ By the summer of 1891 Austen had 'eight milch cows and a young calf';⁶⁵ in October he bought a new Jersey cow at an auction sale at Bingley Hall, bringing his stock up to nine cows and a calf;⁶⁶ another cow was purchased in November,⁶⁷ and two more in October 1892.⁶⁸ Even this does not quite seem to have been sufficient to meet the demand from the household for dairy products, at least over the winter: although Beatrice reported to Neville in June 1891 that the farm had provided all the milk and cream for a large party of visiting schoolchildren, as well as butter and cream for a weekend house party and Devonshire [clotted] cream for two meals,⁶⁹ Ethel informed Austen in October 1892 that they had had to buy some cream for a dance, 'as we had not nearly enough';⁷⁰ and in December 1892 Beatrice told Neville that they were not sure whether to sell the cow called Lady Josephus, in view of the probability that they might be short of butter through January.⁷¹

The main incentive for the expansion of the Highbury livestock holdings, of course, was provided by the acquisition of the Henburys land from Richard Cadbury in 1894, which increased the grassland available to Austen fourfold, as well as adding the 8-acre arable field for fodder crops. In March 1895 Austen wrote to Neville:

My stock at the moment is very numerous.

There are of cows and heifers in milk or in calf – 17

– cow-calves – 6

– bull-calves – 4

– and Highland store cattle – 10

– besides the 31 ewes which are now beginning to lamb

– and two or three more calves which are shortly expected.

These with an in-foal mare, a pony and two carthorses are a pretty heavy stock for 60 acres to carry!⁷²

Thus the dairy herd had increased by more than 50 per cent since 1892, and the store cattle were a new addition to the livestock. The number of sheep kept, moreover, had doubled from the 15 which were reported in the spring of 1894.⁷³

The size of the dairy herd kept on the Highbury farm was no doubt limited not just by the demand from the household for dairy products, but also by the cost of housing the animals. Joe allocated Austen £500 in the spring of 1894 as expenditure on the farm for the year,⁷⁴ and this sum seems to have included the building of a new cow-house and calf-pen, plus a Dutch barn to store the additional hay, as well as the purchase of additional livestock. The new farm buildings were completed by November 1894. The cow-house could accommodate 14 animals,⁷⁵

⁶⁴ It may have been at about the same time, and for the same reason, that Austen began to keep sheep, which are not mentioned in the correspondence until 1892.

⁶⁵ BC2/1/11, Beatrice to Neville, 7 July 1891.

⁶⁶ AC5/3/20, Austen to Neville, 11 Oct. 1891.

⁶⁷ AC4/3/225, Mary to her mother, Mrs. Endicott, 6 Nov. 1891.

⁶⁸ NC1/14/156, Ethel to Austen, 18 Oct. 1892.

⁶⁹ BC2/1/10, Beatrice to Neville, 29 June 1891.

⁷⁰ NC1/14/156, Ethel to Austen, 18 Oct. 1892.

⁷¹ BC2/1/71, Beatrice to Neville, 13 Dec. 1892.

⁷² AC5/3/101, Austen to Neville, 1 Mar. 1895.

⁷³ NC1/14/80, Ethel to Neville, 15 Mar. 1894; NC1/13/2/24, Beatrice to Neville, 3 Apr. 1894.

⁷⁴ AC5/3/83, Austen to Neville, 28 Apr. 1894.

⁷⁵ AC5/3/91, Austen to Neville, 9 Nov. 1894.

and the calf-pen had room for 4–5 calves.⁷⁶ The capital expenditure on the buildings meant that only limited funds remained for the acquisition of livestock. Beatrice wrote to Neville in April 1894 that, ‘Austen spends much time thinking how he can keep within the limit of expenditure Papa has assigned, and at the same time improve his stock and develop his farming operations. He has bought two cows at the Tring Sale, but Brenda and another are to be sold, and he hopes not to have a very large difference to make up’.⁷⁷ The cows that Austen bought at Tring were Jerseys (from Lord Rothschild’s herd), while Brenda – who was to be sold – was not a pedigree animal. The improvement of the stock to which Beatrice referred involved the replacement of non-pedigree cows with pure-bred Jerseys – a policy which had already begun well before the leasing of the Henburys land, as Mary explained to her mother in November 1891: ‘Another cow has been purchased and we now have a fine herd of ten, from which all the bad ones have gone, and those left are chiefly Jerseys, so they look very pretty’.⁷⁸ The ‘prettiness’ of the pedigree Jerseys was often remarked on in the Chamberlains’ correspondence. This might suggest that it reflected a ‘hobby’ mentality, were it not for the fact that the professional agriculturalist James Long made a similar point, when he observed that in addition to the Jerseys, Highbury also had ‘a small herd of West Highland Cattle, whose extremely romantic and characteristic appearance is as pleasing to the eye as that of the Jerseys themselves’.⁷⁹ The aesthetic quality of ‘prettiness’ sometimes came into conflict with the practical criterion of ‘improvement’: Ethel complained to Neville that Austen wanted to keep Brenda’s cow-calf, even though it had no pedigree, because he thought that it was pretty. ‘How is the farm to be made to pay under such circumstances!’ she exclaimed.⁸⁰

Farm produce that was surplus to the needs of the household was sold on the open market. There is no mention of the Chamberlains’ consuming home-reared beef, so the Highland store cattle were presumably raised solely for the market. Mutton and lamb from the Highbury sheep flock were consumed by the family, but most of the lambs were sold as ‘fat lambs’ in the spring. In April 1894 Ethel reported that they planned to sell 20 of their expected 25 lambs as fat lambs as soon as they were old enough, and to run the others on till the autumn, since they would have grass to spare.⁸¹ Pig-meat was consumed within the household, both as pork and as home-cured bacon: sides of bacon were regularly sent out to Neville in the Bahamas. Some pigs were annually fattened and sold at Christmas to a butcher on Gooch Street, in the Highgate district, who used the Chamberlain brand name as a marketing tool. Austen reported to Neville in 1891 that he had seen their monster pig there, labelled ‘bred and fed by the Rt. Hon. J[oseph] C[hamberlain]’, with a crowd looking on.⁸² And in 1894 Ethel saw their fat pig at Gooch Street as she drove to the station, with a label reading: ‘This fine pig was bred and fed by Austen Chamberlain Esq. of Highbury. Aged one year and 10 months’.⁸³

The poultry and eggs produced at Highbury were all consumed within the household (the

⁷⁶ NC1/14/97, Ethel to Neville, 6 Nov. 1894.

⁷⁷ NC1/13/2/24, Beatrice to Neville, 3 Apr. 1894.

⁷⁸ AC4/3/225, Mary to Mrs. Endicott, 6 Nov. 1891. Apart from the Ayrshire cow that Austen mentioned in his letter to Mary of 19 Feb. 1891, there are references in the correspondence to shorthorn crosses, Guernseys

and ‘a small alderney’.

⁷⁹ Long, ‘Chamberlain’.

⁸⁰ NC1/14/70, Ethel to Neville, 5 Jan. 1894.

⁸¹ NC1/14/82, Ethel to Neville, 6 Apr. 1894.

⁸² AC5/3/28, Austen to Neville, 21 Dec. 1891.

⁸³ NC1/14/124, Ethel to Neville, 18 Dec. 1895.

correspondence does not refer to any off-farm sales). Chickens, ducks, geese and turkeys were reared. The geese and turkeys were raised especially for slaughter at the Christmas holiday season. On New Year's Eve 1891 Beatrice reported to Neville that they were to have the largest turkey from the farm for dinner that night.⁸⁴ In December 1892 the butcher was said to be at work on three turkeys, which were a very good size;⁸⁵ and two turkeys killed in December 1893 weighed 18 and 19 lbs.⁸⁶ The household had one of Ethel's turkeys for Christmas dinner in 1895 ('a very fine bird!'),⁸⁷ and the turkey for the New Year's Eve family party of 1896 'was a giant and was much admired'.⁸⁸ In 1897 they also had a turkey for Thanksgiving (Mary Chamberlain was an American from New England) which, however – to Ida's regret – was served without sausages.⁸⁹

The milk produced by the dairy herd was mostly consumed by the household, as liquid milk, cream, clotted cream or butter. There are however occasional references to the sale of milk, even before the expansion of the farm in 1894.⁹⁰ In 1897 Austen, complaining to Beatrice about the bad conditions for farming in general, noted that 'Nothing pays but milk'.⁹¹ In 1898 Ida reported that 'Uncle Arthur' (Joe Chamberlain's brother, who farmed the neighbouring Moor Green estate) was 'going to build a corrugated iron dairy in the rickyard for Mary and she is to really set to work and make cheeses this year'.⁹² It is not clear whether this plan was ever implemented, but – apart from providing a new pastime for Mary – it may have reflected a desire to use up surplus milk produced on the farm in a less perishable form than butter. Occasionally the surplus dairy produce was fed to the pigs. In February 1894 two pigs were being fed on the best separated cream: Ethel joked to Neville that they should advertize 'Highbury Cream-Fed Bacon'.⁹³

The crops produced on the arable field were primarily used as fodder for the livestock, although Ethel refers to the selling of turnips in 1895.⁹⁴ Surplus hay was sold even before 1894: Ethel told Neville in January 1893 that they were planning to sell about 5 tons for £6 per ton.⁹⁵ The acquisition of the Henburys land greatly increased the amount of hay produced. James Long noted, in his December 1894 article about Highbury, that, 'The foreman was very fortunate during the past season in securing his hay in very fine condition. Ricked very smartly on one part of the farm, it is stacked under an extensive and somewhat elaborate Dutch Barn with a wooden floor on the other; and, if sold, is certain to realise a good price, in spite of the large supply in the country'.⁹⁶ In fact the winter of 1894/5 was a harsh one, and the sheep and store cattle had to be fed with corn and hay, which made significant inroads into the haystacks, as Austen complained to Neville: 'In spite of the very big crops of hay last year it is doubtful whether there will be very much left in the rickyards when the hay harvest comes round again'. He hoped that prices would rise, and enable him to sell a little at a good profit.⁹⁷ In December

⁸⁴ BC2/1/39, Beatrice to Neville, 31 Dec. 1891.

⁸⁵ NC1/14/49, Ethel to Neville, 14 Dec. 1892.

⁸⁶ NC1/14/69, Ethel to Neville, 29 Dec. 1893.

⁸⁷ NC1/14/125, Ethel to Neville, 27 Dec. 1895.

⁸⁸ NC1/14/151, Ethel to Neville, 1 Jan. 1897.

⁸⁹ BC1/2/16, Ida to Beatrice, 8 Dec. 1897.

⁹⁰ NC1/14/155, Ethel to Austen, 9–11 Oct. 1892;
NC1/28/9, Austen to Ethel, 10 Nov. 1892.

⁹¹ BC1/4/2, Austen to Beatrice, 31 Dec. 1897.

⁹² BC1/2/31, Ida to Beatrice, 6 Feb. 1898.

⁹³ NC1/14/77, Ethel to Neville, 22 Feb. 1894.

⁹⁴ NC1/14/120, Ethel to Neville, 5 Nov. 1895.

⁹⁵ NC1/14/53, Ethel to Neville, 18 Jan. 1893.

⁹⁶ Long, 'Chamberlain'.

⁹⁷ AC5/3/101, Austen to Neville, 1 Mar. 1895.

1897, in the letter to Beatrice in which he grumbled that nothing paid but milk, Austen also complained that hay was 'dirt cheap'.⁹⁸

It is not clear from the sources whether Austen charged the household for all the farm produce he supplied for domestic consumption. I have found only two pieces of evidence that suggest that a monetary value was attached to items consumed domestically. James Long wrote in his article for *The Rural World* that some of the Highbury sheep were 'killed for home consumption, and very generously supplied for this purpose at less than market price'.⁹⁹ And in May 1896 Ethel, reporting that six of her chickens had been sent to 40 Prince's Gardens to be eaten, complained to Neville that Austen had let the house have them for a 'ridiculously low price'.¹⁰⁰ It seems unlikely on the face of it that Austen would have charged the kitchen for every pound of butter or pint of cream, although the fact that he meticulously recorded the amount of milk and numbers of eggs consumed by the household means that that possibility cannot be ruled out. He certainly kept detailed farm accounts. Writing to Mary in 1896, the future Chancellor of the Exchequer reported: 'I have been busy farming since you left, looking at my cows when out of doors and trying to make my accounts balance and find a vanished 12s. 10d. when indoors. But after all my efforts there was an "irrecoverable balance" of 11s. for which there was no accounting'.¹⁰¹

But even if Austen kept comprehensive records of its income and expenditure, it is difficult to decide whether the Highbury farm can be judged as a commercial enterprise, since its economy must have been inextricably bound up with that of other elements of the estate. Labour appears to have been shared with the house, gardens, hot-houses and stables, depending on the seasonal pattern of work in each of these areas (only Wileman, the stockman, appears to have devoted all of his time to the farm) and it is unlikely that detailed records were kept of the number of days or hours that estate employees spent on every task. The farm was the most intensively productive element of the estate: the ornamental gardens, the kitchen garden, the orchard and the hot-houses also provided consumables which would otherwise have had to be bought in – flowers for interior decoration, fruit for the table and vegetables for the kitchen – but such elements of the estate as the gardens and hot-houses must be considered primarily recreational, and expenditure on them classified as conspicuous consumption rather than investment. Land-rent for the productive acreage of the farmland would also be difficult to separate out from that for the landscaped amenity areas of the estate parkland. Thus Austen's farming activity at Highbury fits James Long's category of 'a leisure occupation ... based upon business principles'; but we cannot assess its profitability or otherwise as a commercial enterprise, and to that extent it may be valid to describe it as a 'hobby farm'.

II

If the Highbury farm was run on 'business principles', as James Long claimed, what is the evidence in support of his assertion that Austen Chamberlain's farming operations were

⁹⁸ BC1/4/2, Austen to Beatrice, 31 Dec. 1897.

⁹⁹ Long, 'Chamberlain'.

¹⁰⁰ NC1/14/140, Ethel to Neville, 5 May 1896.

¹⁰¹ Austen to Mary, 7 Sept. 1896, pr. Petrie, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 72.

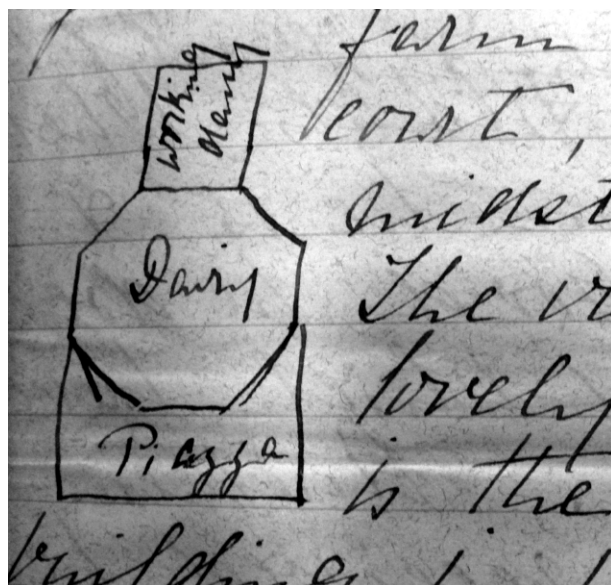


FIGURE 2. Mary Chamberlain's sketch-plan of the dairy at Highbury, in a letter to her mother dated 28 June 1890.

Source: The Chamberlain papers (AC4/3/155), Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham.

conducted on 'sound and advanced lines' and based on 'scientific observation and research'? Some of this evidence is provided by Long himself, on the basis of his inspection of the farm in December 1894. 'Mr. Austen Chamberlain,' he wrote,

possesses a herd of Jerseys, among which are a number of extremely useful animals. They are housed in a neat, well-arranged and substantial building constructed solely for their comfort and without any attempt at display or ostentation. Rations are carefully provided and prepared with the object of obtaining a maximum yield at a minimum cost; and I was enabled to glean that, while Mr. Chamberlain has a keen appreciation as to the value of the albuminoid ratio, *i.e.*, an economic ration, his stockman has an equally keen appreciation of the money value of the food. The milk is separated in a Laval machine in a very perfectly-arranged dairy erected by the Dairy Supply Company, and equipped with the best modern appliances for making butter.

The other livestock too, Long judged – the Highland cattle, Shropshire sheep and Tamworth pigs – were 'of the very best type'.¹⁰²

The cow-house that Professor Long admired so much was presumably the one which had been completed in November 1894: Beatrice referred to it as the cows' 'new palace',¹⁰³ while Austen himself described it as 'bright and airy', with improved sanitation.¹⁰⁴ The working dairy had been erected earlier, in 1889–91, as an adjunct to an ornamental thatched dairy, with verandah, that Mary had ordered to be built soon after her marriage, on a site that would hide the farmyard from the view from the house (Figures 2 and 3).¹⁰⁵ The 'appliances'

¹⁰² Long, 'Chamberlain'.

¹⁰³ NC1/13/2/40, Beatrice to Neville, 6 Nov. 1894.

¹⁰⁴ AC5/3/91, Austen to Neville, 9 Nov. 1894.

¹⁰⁵ AC4/3/114, Mary to Mrs Endicott, 8 Nov. 1889.

There is a sketch of this construction, showing the

'working dairy' to occupy only a fraction of the area of the ornamental dairy and its 'piazza' (shown in Figure 2), in a letter from Mary to her mother: Mary to Mrs Endicott, 28 June 1890 (AC4/3/155).



FIGURE 3. A photograph of the front elevation of the dairy in Charles H. Curtis, 'Highbury Gardens, Birmingham', *The Gardeners' Magazine*, 18 April 1903, p. 256.

Source: Copy in the Chamberlain papers (JC4/12/2), Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham.

were installed in April and May 1891. They included the separator, which Mary described as 'a very extraordinary machine' and 'a great toy'.¹⁰⁶ Even Wileman found the separator to be a novelty: Austen informed Neville that all the visitors were taken to see it.¹⁰⁷ At about this time Austen bought some test tubes to assess the percentage of cream in his milk, but these turned out to be too crude: they were graduated only to 25 per cent, while his new Jersey cow gave about 28 per cent.¹⁰⁸ In February 1894 he sent some cows' milk to London to be tested;¹⁰⁹ but in November, when the new cow-house was finished, he acquired a new milk tester which, according to Ethel, kept him happy and busy in the wet weather.¹¹⁰ In February 1894 Ethel reported that Austen had acquired a new 'disc churn' on approval. It was supposed to make butter in 5–10 minutes, but the first attempt took half an hour. The second attempt was more successful, but the machine was too hard work for Mrs Wileman without one

¹⁰⁶ AC4/3/186, Mary to Mrs Endicott, 27 Mar. 1891; AC4/3/187, Mary to Mrs Endicott, 1 Apr. 1891.

¹⁰⁷ AC5/3/10, Austen to Neville, 4 July 1891.

¹⁰⁸ AC5/3/20, Austen to Neville, 11 Oct. 1891.

¹⁰⁹ NC1/14/75, Ethel to Neville, 10 Feb. 1894.

¹¹⁰ NC1/14/98, Ethel to Neville, 14 Nov. 1894.

of the men to help, and only made small quantities, so no decision had yet been taken on whether to purchase it.¹¹¹

We have already noted that Austen sought to improve the quality of his dairy herd by acquiring pure-bred Jerseys to replace his non-pedigree stock of less prestigious breeds; and many of his new Jerseys were purchased from Lord Rothschild's highly regarded herd at Tring. In December 1893 Austen spent two days at Tring Park, where he acquired 'useful hints' from the agent. Austen discovered that he was over-feeding his cows, since Jerseys would over-eat if allowed to: Lord Rothschild's cows were always tethered, even at grass, and before calving they were allowed only chopped straw. This regime, according to the Tring agent, kept the cows healthy but small, and produced a combination of great milking capacity with good looks.¹¹²

For poultry-rearing, too, the Chamberlains used modern technology, although it caused them some problems. In February 1891 Austen told Mary that, 'The incubator is crazy, and requires a week's careful watching at least'.¹¹³ The following year the news was better. Austen informed Neville that his big incubator had proved a great success: 'It hatched 46 chickens out of 52 eggs and they are all strong and healthy; and it has done equally well with ducklings'.¹¹⁴ Difficulties continued, however, in subsequent years. In March 1894 Ethel reported that the chickens had done badly, because the incubator was not hot enough.¹¹⁵ There were problems again in 1896, although the numbers were larger: 100 chickens had hatched, but many continued to die in the shell.¹¹⁶ By comparing the hatchings of chickens at Highbury in 1895 with those on Arthur Chamberlain's neighbouring farm at Moor Green – which was evidently not so technologically advanced – Ethel was convinced of 'the advantage of an incubator'.¹¹⁷ But in 1898 the situation was reversed, much to the chagrin of the Chamberlain sisters. Ida reported to Beatrice: 'Ethel has got 29 chickens out of about 80 eggs in the incubator. She was congratulating herself on having at least done better than last year when round came those horrid Moor Greens and announced that they had 45, and that they had had two broods of 10 and one of 11 from under hens. Did you ever hear anything so aggravating?'¹¹⁸

Because of the limited December daylight, James Long was unable to inspect Austen's arable crops during his 1894 visit, but he claimed in his article that they were 'produced upon a principle, the object of which is to provide as much feeding material on a small area as possible'.¹¹⁹ According to Long's article, the crops grown were vetches, lucerne, roots and cabbage; the correspondence mentions potatoes, turnips, mangels, parsnips and carrots as root crops, and rye and red clover in addition to vetches and cabbages. In the first year, the winter-sown crops seem to have been quite successful: Ethel reported in April 1895 that a gentleman who had seen the vetches and rye from a passing train had offered to buy them.¹²⁰ The second year was not so good. Hilda noted in April 1896: 'Poor Austen's winter crops this year can hardly be deemed a success.' The cabbages were running to seed, and the red clover

¹¹¹ NC1/14/75, Ethel to Neville, 9 Feb. 1894.

¹¹² AC5/3/68, Austen to Neville, 4 Dec. 1893.

¹¹³ Austen to Mary, 19 Feb. 1891, pr. Petrie, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 40.

¹¹⁴ AC5/3/42, Austen to Neville, 23 Apr. 1892.

¹¹⁵ NC1/14/79, Ethel to Neville, 10 Mar. 1894.

¹¹⁶ NC1/14/134, Ethel to Neville, 21 Mar. 1896.

¹¹⁷ NC1/14/111, Ethel to Neville, 5 Apr. 1895.

¹¹⁸ BC1/2/31, Ida to Beatrice, 6 Feb. 1898.

¹¹⁹ Long, 'Chamberlain'.

¹²⁰ NC1/14/111, Ethel to Neville, 5 Apr. 1895.

had been overgrown by chickweed. The vetches had been planted too late, and never came up. The rye grass had also been planted too late and was only half the height it ought to be.¹²¹

The only element of Austen's farming operation about which James Long was at all critical was his production of silage. Reporting that the aftermath of the hay harvest had been converted into silage, 'Johnson's Apparatus being used', Long noted that 'this is the only *partially* successful feature on the farm; but it was an experiment, and simply emphasises the suggestions I have often made, to the effect that stacked silage is not economic as compared with silo storage'.¹²² Long's mild criticism of Austen's silage was nothing, however, compared with his sisters' scorn. Hilda wrote to Neville in December 1894: 'Austen has just cut into his silo. The results are awful. The ensilage is said to be very good, but at present all the animals have refused it'. Wileman suggested cutting it up and mixing it with chaff. Hilda continued: 'I expect they *will* eat it, but am thankful it is not going to be given to the cows as I think the milk, butter and cream would suffer. Fortunately Austen thinks so too. The smell is horrible at present, but we hope it will go off in a day or two'. Joe had said that he couldn't smell it, but everyone else, including Austen, said it was disgusting. The beef cattle to whom it was offered did accept it, Hilda added: 'The bullocks and Highlanders generally have consented to eat the ensilage, but Austen is now not quite sure whether it is sufficiently high and is thinking of sending a sample to Moor Green to see what Uncle Arthur thinks of it'.¹²³ It is not known what Arthur Chamberlain's opinion was, but Austen found reassurance elsewhere. In February 1895 he and Ida visited 'Sugden', a local farmer, from whom they bought two cows. Austen wrote to Mary: 'Sugden was feeding all his dairy cows on ensilage ranker and blacker than mine, and the cowhouse smelt strongly of it, but he says he has had no complaint of the milk'.¹²⁴ Austen went ahead with feeding the silage to his cattle: Ethel reported in April 1895 that it was being fed to 'the different beasts in nearly all the fields', though she still complained of the smell.¹²⁵

The one area in which James Long suggested improvements to Austen's farming operation was his use of fertilizer. He stated in his article that Austen was 'keenly alive to the value of artificial fertilisers', but the family correspondence for this period makes little mention of the application of fertilizer to the land. The few references to manure seem to refer to animal manure; only in one letter, of 1891, does Austen refer specifically to non-animal fertilizer, when he attributes his 'splendid crop' of hay to the use of soil, lime and clay on the fields.¹²⁶ Long, however, strongly advocated the application of artificial fertilizer (potash, nitrogen and phosphate) to arable land. He proposed that Austen conduct tests, by devoting two days to the arrangement of three plots, each of one tenth of an acre, on which swede seeds would be sown in identical fashion, but with three different types of manure. In this way, Long explained to his readers,

we are not only enabled to ascertain under which system of manuring we get the heaviest and best crops, but we are enabled to demonstrate to others how easily and how simply

¹²¹ NC1/15/3/76, Hilda to Neville, 3 Apr. 1896.

¹²² Long, 'Chamberlain'. Long's obituary in *The Times* recorded that he 'was an early advocate of ensilage': *The Times*, 3 Oct. 1931.

¹²³ NC1/15/3/35, Hilda to Neville, 27 Dec. 1894.

¹²⁴ Austen to Mary, 3 Feb. 1895, pr. Petrie, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 65.

¹²⁵ NC1/14/112, Ethel to Neville, 12 Apr. 1895.

¹²⁶ AC5/3/14, Austen to Neville, 24 July 1891.

valuable information is obtained. The crops are seen growing side by side; they are weighed when lifted, and, in future, we are able to deduce that by using the manure employed in raising the largest crop, we may succeed in producing a better average yield.

Such an experiment, he claimed, 'would probably provide an object lesson which would be of immense value to a large number of people, and I venture to think that if Mr Chamberlain, who ... from the study he has devoted to the subject is well qualified to carry it out, would provide such a lesson, he would contribute more than his share towards the amelioration of the difficulties under which agriculture is suffering'.¹²⁷

There is no evidence that Austen ever carried out such experiments at Highbury, and indeed Professor Long's suggestion that the M.P. should – presumably – write up and publish the results of such fertilizer trials, as a contribution to the improvement of British agricultural productivity, was a somewhat unrealistic one. Nevertheless, Long's proposal raises some interesting questions about the relationship between a 'hobby farm' and a 'model farm'. Long himself in his article does not use either term, but the contrast he draws between the 'dilettante practices' of some landowners and the seriousness of Austen Chamberlain's commitment to scientific farming suggests that if he had used the term 'hobby farm', he might have done so in a somewhat pejorative manner, to indicate the more frivolous end of the leisure-farming, pleasure-farming or amateur-farming spectrum. Another writer made such a distinction: as we have already noted, George Cadbury's biographer claimed that his farm was 'not a hobby' but an 'object lesson' and an experiment. For others, however, 'hobby farm' and 'model farm' were virtually synonymous. Muthesius commented, in relation to the hobby farms that he described: 'To denote this type of farm attached to a large country property the English use the term model farm, which in itself indicates that all the details have been worked out with careful consideration and without stint'.¹²⁸ Muthesius may have misunderstood the significance of the epithet 'model' in this context, as meaning 'ideal' rather than 'exemplary', but his testimony nevertheless provides a valuable indication that the term was widely used in the late nineteenth century in relation to hobby farms. Indeed, one journalist who wrote a feature article on Highbury referred to 'Mr Austen Chamberlain's model farm'.¹²⁹ Several decades later, the Astor-Rowntree Report noted that, 'The hobby farmer is the modern semi-urbanised successor of the great landlords of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, whose "home farms" were once the centres of agricultural progress'.¹³⁰ Thus where in the late eighteenth century the home farms of large landlords might serve as models of good practice for their tenants and neighbours,¹³¹ a century later James Long hoped that Austen Chamberlain's suburban hobby farm would provide an 'object lesson' for ordinary smallholders.

Although the evidence suggests that in the 1890s Austen Chamberlain took his farming activities seriously, devoting considerable time and effort to the management of the land and livestock on the most modern principles available to him, and engaging with the market as well as supplying the consumption needs of the household, James Long was perhaps

¹²⁷ Long, 'Chamberlain'.

¹²⁸ Muthesius, *English House*, p. 102.

¹²⁹ Innes Adair, 'Highbury, Birmingham: the home of the Right Hon. Joseph Chamberlain, M.P.', *The Weekly*

Scotsman, 8 July 1899 (copy in JC4/12/1).

¹³⁰ *Mixed Farming and Muddled Thinking*, p. 103.

¹³¹ See, for example, Stuart Macdonald, 'Model Farms', in Mingay (ed.), *Victorian Countryside*, I, pp. 214–26.

disingenuous in suggesting that his commitment to agriculture was – or realistically could be – anything more than a leisure occupation. As his political career took off – between 1895 and 1905 he was successively Civil Lord of the Admiralty, Financial Secretary to the Treasury, Postmaster General and Chancellor of the Exchequer – Austen had an ever-diminishing amount of time and energy to devote to the farm. After Neville's return from the Bahamas in 1897, our main source of detailed information about the farm dries up, but the indications are that from the late 1890s Austen was less involved in agricultural activity than he had been previously. Wileman, who had been warned about his conduct since at least 1898, was finally dismissed for drunkenness in 1904.¹³² A new farm bailiff (evidently the employee referred to as 'Perrett' in the post-1904 family correspondence) was recruited, and a cottage was built for him.¹³³ Ida reported to Neville in January 1905 that 'the new man at the farm' was restoring Austen's interest in it, and that he was 'full of plans for future improvements'.¹³⁴ But whatever new interest he took in the farm seems to have been short-lived. The Liberal victory in the 1906 General Election meant that in theory Austen, being again in Opposition, would have more time for his leisure occupations, but his marriage and move into a new London house (although he continued to use Highbury as his constituency base), followed by the births of his three children, provided him with an alternative emotional outlet to livestock-raising. Ida assumed the main responsibility for the farm, but after Joe's stroke in July 1906 she and her sisters spent much time in the south of France helping Mary to care for her invalid husband. On Joe's death in July 1914 the household dispersed and Highbury passed into institutional use.

III

Finally, let us consider how far, and in what ways, their own experiences of farming and estate ownership may have influenced the Chamberlains' and the Cadburys' views on current agrarian issues.

A major aim of James Long's article on Highbury in *The Rural World* in December 1894 was to bid for Austen Chamberlain's support for farmers' interests, especially those of smallholders. By implication, Long was hoping that Austen would take up the cause of agricultural reform that his father had championed in the 1870s and '80s, but which Joe subsequently neglected in favour of grander national campaigns such as opposition to Irish Home Rule. 'If the farmers of Great Britain are not to have the advantage of the powerful advocacy of the Right Hon. J. Chamberlain, MP, the distinguished leader of the Liberal Unionist party', Long's article began, with a hint of reproach directed at the elder Chamberlain, 'they doubtless have his sympathy; and they have something more than the sympathy of his son Mr. Austen Chamberlain, MP, who has not only joined the ranks, but has been quietly following the occupation of a husbandman during the leisure which Parliament places at his disposal'. And Long went on to argue that Austen's practical experience on his Highbury farm, 'which may, not inaptly, be described as a small holding, inasmuch as it is not a large one', was likely to

¹³² BC1/2/23, Ida to Beatrice, 7 Jan. 1898; NC1/20/1/42, Neville to Mary, 20 Mar. 1904.

¹³³ Ballard, *Highbury Park*, p. 48.

¹³⁴ NC1/16/1/2, Ida to Neville, 12 Jan. 1905.

have led him to sympathize with 'the rank-and-file farmer who is endeavouring to live, under difficulties, by following the same occupation'.¹³⁵

There was indeed a basis for Long's hopes that Austen Chamberlain would act as a parliamentary champion of agrarian reform. In his by-election address of March 1892 Austen had praised the social reforms of the Unionist government, noting that 'They have passed two Allotment Acts, of the value of which my intimate connection with the Rural Labourers' League has given me ample proof'.¹³⁶ He continued, however, that much remained for the government to do: 'They have already introduced a Bill into Parliament for the creation of small-holdings. I desire to see it supplemented by a measure facilitating and cheapening the transfer of land, and by such changes in the law as may be necessary to secure the provision of proper cottage accommodation in the country districts'.¹³⁷ The Rural Labourers' League, to which Austen referred in his address, had been formed in 1888 by Jesse Collings, a long-time friend and political associate of Joe Chamberlain, and a fellow Liberal Unionist M.P. for a Birmingham constituency. Collings, who was an influential advocate of land reform, had been instrumental in recruiting Joe Chamberlain to the cause, and they had campaigned together under the famous slogan of 'three acres and a cow' in 1885.¹³⁸ Joe's advocacy of agrarian reform does not seem to have had any connection with his creation of the farm on his Highbury estate: rather, it was part of his broader commitment to a radical programme of social change, against the background of the agricultural depression, and at a time when growing sections of the rural population were becoming enfranchised.

James Long himself was a champion of land reform, and had given evidence to the Royal Commission on Agriculture in 1894.¹³⁹ In December 1894 he served as a judge at the annual Cattle and Poultry Show held at Bingley Hall in Birmingham, and on that occasion he and his wife were invited to dinner, along with Austen and Ethel Chamberlain, by Jesse Collings.¹⁴⁰ (It was presumably during this visit to Birmingham that Long conducted the inspection of the Highbury farm on which he reported in *The Rural World*.) But if Long had hoped to encourage Austen to become a leading advocate of land reform, his hopes were not realized. In the General Election of 1895, Austen's election address was less forthcoming on the issue of land reform than its 1892 equivalent had been. Noting that the recently formed Unionist government was committed to introducing 'practical measures of social reform', he listed '[t]he prolonged depression of agriculture' as only one of 'the questions to which the new Government will direct their attention'.¹⁴¹ Austen's main priority as a politician was to support his father's great causes: opposition to Home Rule; and later, at the beginning of the twentieth century, tariff reform and imperial preference. Tariff reform, of course, offered a degree of protection to all types of farmers who produced for the market – but that was not the main motivation for the Chamberlains' promotion of the policy.

¹³⁵ Long, 'Chamberlain'.

¹³⁶ Petrie, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 46.

¹³⁷ Ibid., I, p. 46.

¹³⁸ On Collings and his relationship with the Chamberlains, see, for example Jesse Collings and Sir John L. Green, *Life of the Right Hon. Jesse Collings*, with an introduction by Austen Chamberlain (1920), pp. 91–106,

175–81 and passim.

¹³⁹ BPP, 1894, XVI, 'Minutes of evidence taken before HM Commissioners appointed to inquire into the subject of agricultural depression', II, pp. 395–415.

¹⁴⁰ NC1/14/102, Ethel to Neville, 6 Dec. 1894.

¹⁴¹ Petrie, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 70.

Austen Chamberlain's concern for the welfare of smallholders, as expressed in his 1892 election address, seems to have derived primarily from his and his father's association with Jesse Collings: contrary to James Long's assumption, there is little evidence that his practical involvement in managing his Highbury 'small holding' enabled him to identify in any meaningful way with the problems of ordinary farmers. For George Cadbury, however, a commitment to land reform did derive from his personal experience – but primarily from his experience of the model village at Bournville, rather than of the farms on his estates. Cadbury believed that the evils of society, and especially of urban industrial society, stemmed from the alienation of the people from the land, and that these evils could best be overcome by reconnecting the lives of the workers with the natural world.¹⁴² It was largely for this reason that he and his brother Richard decided to relocate their chocolate factory in 1879 from central Birmingham to the then rural setting of Bournville.¹⁴³ For the same reason, George invited thousands of poor children from the city slums every summer for day trips to his estates, first at Woodbrooke and later at The Manor House, where he built a large rustic-style hall to cater for the young visitors who played in the grounds; Richard Cadbury laid on similar entertainments at Moseley Hall and Uffculme.¹⁴⁴ Bournville village, which George Cadbury began to construct in 1895, provided low-density housing in a rural environment: there were only seven houses to the acre, and each house occupied no more than a quarter of the land allocated to it, the rest being garden on which the household grew fruit and vegetables as well as flowers. Surveys showed that the gardens produced £58 worth of food per acre per annum, compared with £5 worth per acre per annum on pasture land.¹⁴⁵ On the basis of this evidence, George was converted to the idea of the intensive cultivation of small-scale landholdings, whether in cottage gardens or on smallholdings of 20–30 acres that could be worked co-operatively, on the Danish model. At the same time, he advocated a new tax on land values, and the compulsory purchase of rural land for the relocation of factories and their workforce. In 1916, in a letter to the Trades Union Congress, he criticized large landowners for the low productivity of their estates: 'The wealthy hold the land, millions of acres of which provide for a mere handful of men sport, such as hunting, shooting, and racing. This land might produce ten times as much food if properly cultivated, and many million acres set apart for deer forests might produce timber and provide healthy and profitable employment'.¹⁴⁶ George Cadbury clearly did not regard his own modest estate at Northfield, with its model dairy farm, as deserving the same censure as these large landholdings; his acquisition of rural residences for himself and his family reflected the idea of the spiritual benefits of reconnection with the natural world that also underpinned his creation of the factory and village at Bournville. Unlike other Victorian advocates of 'back to the land', he did not reject industrialization, but rather sought the relocation of factories in the countryside.

George Cadbury's second son, George Cadbury jun., who had followed his father into the family firm, was also an advocate of agrarian reform. In 1908, along with Tom Bryan, a tutor

¹⁴² Gardiner, *Life of George Cadbury*, pp. 84, 121, 143, pp. 221–2, 257.
301–4.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 31–6.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 128–30; Alexander, *Richard Cadbury*,

¹⁴⁵ Gardiner, *Life of George Cadbury*, pp. 148–9.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 84, 121, 161, 165–6.

at Woodbrooke, the Quaker college founded by George Cadbury sen. on the site of his old home in Selly Oak, he published a book entitled *The Land and the Landless*. This provided a historical survey of the alienation of the population from the land, from the late middle ages to the Small Holdings and Allotments Act of 1907. In their Preface, the authors identified 'the revival of English rural life' as '[o]ne of the pressing problems of the day', and argued that it was 'essential both to individual and national well-being that the English people should be brought into closer relationship with English land'. The answer lay in the creation of smallholdings and allotments, but this in itself was insufficient: successful reform would also involve the development of co-operatives, the encouragement of small manufacturing industries in the countryside, and the promotion of a liberal general education, as well as technical agricultural training, in rural schools.¹⁴⁷ In 1925 George Cadbury jun. founded Avoncroft college, near Bromsgrove, for the education of agricultural workers. Like Fircroft, the adult education college in Selly Oak that he had set up in 1909 (with Tom Bryan as its first warden), Avoncroft was modelled on the Danish High Schools to which he attributed much of the success of smallholder farming in Denmark.¹⁴⁸

IV

Thus several prominent members of the Chamberlain and Cadbury families, in line with many other middle-class people of their time, professed a concern with types of agricultural reform that would protect and promote the interests of smallholders.¹⁴⁹ This concern, however, seems to have sprung from their general espousal of radical politics, rather than from their personal experience of small-scale farming. Like many industrialists in the Victorian era, the Cadburys and the Chamberlains purchased rural estates as soon as they acquired sufficient wealth to invest in such properties. As was the case of other Birmingham businessmen, however, their estates were only of modest size; and they were located on the outskirts of the city, within commuting distance of the centre, so that they involved no sharp break with urban life. For the majority of the Birmingham bourgeoisie, the small livestock farms on their estates were simply one of the trappings of landownership, a status symbol to be left to the care of a bailiff or other 'outdoor servant'. For some, however – notably Austen Chamberlain at Highbury and, to a lesser extent, George Cadbury sen. at The Manor House, Northfield – the management of their farms was a much more serious enterprise which, while never amounting to fully commercialized agricultural production, went beyond 'hobby farming' and came closer to a miniature version of the 'model farming' of the progressive landowners of the late eighteenth century.

¹⁴⁷ George Cadbury, Jun. and Tom Bryan, *The land and the landless* (1908).

¹⁴⁸ Winifred Marks, with Christopher Cadbury, *George Cadbury Junior, 1878–1954* (1982?), pp. 25–9.

¹⁴⁹ On this phenomenon, see, for example, John R. Fisher, 'Agrarian Politics', in Collins (ed.), *Agrarian History*, VII (i), pp. 321–57.