

Letter to the Editor

DEAR SIR,—In a recent issue of *The Economic History Review* (vol. XXVIII, 4), Dr M. Turner remarks that “new evidence suggests that the cost of enclosure was far greater than previous historians . . . were aware.” This evidence took the form of a most perceptive and detailed account of certain aspects of enclosure costs in Buckinghamshire, and appeared in the 1973 issue (vol. XXI, 1) of this Journal. It seems useful to attempt to place the present state of the discussion within some sort of perspective, since Turner’s main source of comparison was a piece written by me many years ago (republished 1967). The latter had aimed to challenge the prevailing views on the subject expressed in the writings of W. E. Tate and others. This opinion held that “contemporaries and later historians had greatly exaggerated the cost of enclosure, and that the monetary outlay was not enough in itself to have any serious effect in driving the (small) man out of business.”

Apart from attempting to broaden the definition of the term “cost” as applied to enclosure, I drew four main conclusions from a study of Warwickshire material (none of which had previously received much attention); they were (1) for every acre enclosed the public costs alone rose probably six-fold over the course of the eighteenth century; (2) the figures arrived at were considerably in advance of the average of £1 (which included fences) quoted by Mr Tate, and the General Report of 1808; (3) for the small owner the share of the commissioners’ public expenses, and the cost of physically making his enclosures were markedly higher, acre for acre, than for his more fortunate neighbour who received an allotment of say 200 acres; (4) the cost of physically creating the enclosures, until then virtually ignored, was in any case found to be higher than the sum of the public expenses set out in the commissioners schedule.

While Dr Turner has little to say about (3)

and (4) his paper shows that during the special economic climate prevailing in the French Wars men were encouraged to push forward with enclosures which could be effectively exploited only by the additional outlay of large sums of money on ancillary improvements (particularly on new roads). Such operations commonly extended over a period of years, and (not surprisingly) are therefore difficult to take fully into account (even, as Dr Turner demonstrates, where commissioners’ minute books survive). On the basis of examples of the proportional cost of road improvement quoted by Turner and myself (£1,010 of £2,898 at Oxhill, Warks.; and £3,930 of £11,722 at Princes Risborough, Bucks.), it is possible to view ancillary improvement as the main determinant of cost per acre from around the turn of the century. Turner’s charge that my figures understate the final bill for public costs seems perfectly plausible for the years after 1800, but much less so for the eighteenth century: in Warwickshire, at least, protracted outlay of capital on ambitious ancillary projects was largely a by-product of hugely inflated farming profits in the 1790’s.

Whatever the outcome of that particular question, there remains an even more important area of enquiry (in addition to those suggested by Dr Turner) to which researchers might profitably direct their attention: further light needs to be thrown on the private individual costs of actually making the enclosures, and the means by which this outlay was met; such an investigation would also further illuminate the practice by which the smallest owner appeared to be saddled with a disproportionate share of this expense. This side of the problem is as important as that of the inflation of public costs, and is linked to the notable changes within the ranks of landowner families to which Dr Turner draws attention in his more recent paper.

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