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**LANDED ESTATES
AND RURAL
INEQUALITY IN
ENGLISH HISTORY**

From the Mid-Seventeenth
Century to the Present

Eric L. Jones



Palgrave Studies in Economic History

Series Editor
Kent Deng
London School of Economics
London, UK

“Landed estates and their owners have long dominated the political, social and economic control of the English countryside. In this masterly survey of their development since the mid-seventeenth century, Eric Jones uses a potent mix of well-chosen case examples and select economic concepts to draw out their character in a way that convincingly challenges past ideas about them.

His overarching thesis is that despite the changes of ownership wrought by otherwise disruptive socio-political events like the Restoration or Glorious Revolution, and despite their ranks having to absorb estate owners from wholly different backgrounds to those whose pedigrees had long been planted in the soil, including many deep-pocketed industrialists and successful mercantile families, the shared ethos and behaviour of those who possessed landed estates remained consistent in what they stood for and the self-referential values which they collectively projected.

Across chapters whose coverage ranges from how owners of such estates dealt with their tenants or those who dared to poach their game, to how they sought to exclude others from their private space and gaze both within their mansions as well as without, Jones highlights their persistent organisation around control, self-interest and leisurely indulgence. With his trademark interweave of well-researched case-studies and broader insightful observations and a willingness to challenge basic assumptions, Jones has produced a study of landed estates and their owners that—in the language of the chase—succeeds in flushing out from cover many new issues and debates that will surely run and run.”

—Robert Dodgshon, *Aberystwith University, Wales*

“Eric Jones, one of the most respected and original economic historians of our age, has produced an indignant and sparkling indictment of landed estates in rural England. He mercilessly dissects the economic follies, environmental destruction, and social travesties committed by a callous gentry class in search of luxurious mansions, hunting grounds, and rustic views.”

—Joel Mokyr, *Northwestern University, United States*

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“Landed estates have been a defining feature of English society for centuries. In this book, Eric Jones provides us with a rare overview of their history as a single narrative from the mid-seventeenth century through to present times. His account is vivid, learned and elegant. It not only skilfully elucidates the malleability that underpinned the estates’ survival through a procession of wars, depressions and major economic changes, but also examines aspects of their impact that have hitherto been typically less well explored in the literature, such as the estates’ roles in the erosion of public rights of way, in the socially destructive remodelling of the landscape, and in the environmental harm wrought by blood sports. Viewed from this broader perspective, the landed estates of England are revealed more as sources of social stagnation and inequality than economic growth. Deeply researched and cogently argued, Jones’ *Landed Estates and Rural Inequality* sheds important new light on the relationships between landownership, economy and society in English history.”

—Gary Magee, *Monash University, Australia*

“Jones presents an overview of the English landed estate system from its medieval origins to the influx of industrial capital in the nineteenth century. He demonstrates that it was not only the concentration of capital in the landed class which defined and perpetuated social inequities, but also how the capital was deployed in re-shaping the countryside to service the leisure as well as the business interests of the land owners and their upwardly mobile tenants.”

—Patrick Dillon, *University of Exeter, United Kingdom*

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Landed Estates and Rural Inequality in English History

From the Mid-Seventeenth Century to the Present

palgrave
macmillan

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Palgrave Studies in Economic History
ISBN 978-3-319-74868-9 ISBN 978-3-319-74869-6 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74869-6>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018934455

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Cover illustration: Pattern adapted from an Indian cotton print produced in the 19th century

Printed on acid-free paper

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*For Michael Tarrant
Three-greats grandson of an Ashbury poacher*

PROLOGUE

By the 1870s one-quarter of England was held in estates of over 10,000 acres and there were innumerable lesser ones. The existence and expansion of vast tracts of land in the hands of individual families brought with it a whole train of negative social and economic effects. Estates signalled enormous disparities in wealth and income, keeping ordinary citizens out of much of the countryside except as poorly paid employees, reducing the productivity of broad acres and hosting sports that abuse or kill wildlife. Positive effects, such as the agricultural improvements promoted by some landowners or the conservation of certain birds and mammals (in order to hunt them later), were real but seem of relatively minor consequence. Improvement and conservation could have been achieved by less exclusive and socially harmful means.

The historical analysis here starts in the mid-seventeenth century. Although estates had long existed, both the Cromwellian and Restoration regimes of the 1650s and 1660s decisively reaffirmed the existence of the landed system. What followed was a long-term increase in the number of estates, a growing privatisation of community assets and an enormous widening of the gap between social classes in the countryside. This book is an essay about these matters based on extensive reading, sometimes in minor sources, often very local ones. The narrative is built up from findings that are fungible, which is to say the examples cited are intended to stand in for others. There are too many fugitive references to list them all, which is not surprising given the existence of innumerable estates and villages, not to mention the even greater number of individual farm businesses. The material is to a large extent regional, although with a wider

canvassing to confirm that the narrative and conclusions apply to lowland England as a whole.

The enclosure of common fields and suppression of rights over common grazing are well known but in this volume detailed attention is paid to the erosion of public rights of way, a process usually missing from historical writings. Special notice is accordingly taken of landscape effects, which are much downplayed by economic historians despite the considerable implications for capital investment as well as for social relations. These effects included building high walls that prevented the populace from enjoying the mere sight of parkland. More damagingly, a number of villages, even churches, were demolished. Engrossing or diverting public rights of way—road capture—was extremely common, as the assault on footpaths continues to be. These moves were the tip of an iceberg of landscape remodelling aimed at little of greater significance than securing privacy or improving the view from the big house. Amenity considerations like these are usually left to architectural and landscape historians who dwell on the aesthetic rewards and ignore social reality and economic implications. The highhandedness of estate building was mirrored by an often callous treatment of staff, indoors and out.

Still more explicit notice is paid in one chapter to the malign consequences for wildlife. A concern, not to say obsession, with blood sports was a major preoccupation of the landowning classes which has received less than appropriate notice in general histories or indeed modern studies. The almost universal organised cruelty towards animals, including birds and fish, takes some explaining. It represented status and occasion for male bonding. In this respect the text also rests on detailed local evidence. When the incidents are gathered together the cumulative impact of the abuse of animals, like that of social oppression, is seen to be devastating. These features of the English experience are easy to overlook given that the long period considered in this book also saw economic growth and industrialisation. Estate building typically involved the transfer of urban profits to the countryside and can be seen as an epiphenomenon of growth with significant collateral damage to the rural sector. This was not assuaged by the unintended consequence of providing a popular modern leisure resource in the form of country houses and parks belonging to the National Trust, membership of which approaches five million in the early twenty-first century.

Survival of the landed estate system through all the political and economic upheavals of time is a salient matter. The fact that agriculture was for so long the largest sector in the economy and was increasingly organised in

the form of tenant farms on larger and larger estates guarantees this. Individual landowning families might rise or fall but the system itself persisted by continually regrouping. Those in power at the national level tended to be personally involved, took current arrangements for granted and made no great effort to abolish the order of things. The order prevailed despite the shift in emphasis within the farming industry brought about by the Repeal of the Corn Laws and the fact that spells of heavy taxation in the twentieth century may sometimes seem to have been threatening. Abiding support for the estate system was to be had because the land's amenity attractions and opportunities for social dominance repeatedly drew in new money. One chapter here deals with this topic in close-up—the inflow of cotton fortunes, mostly from Lancashire, into a single southern English region. This was an important episode in the investment in land of profits made elsewhere, a process that underpinned the persistence of the system as a whole whatever the misfortunes of particular families.

One aim of this book is therefore to counter the bland nature of so much literature on parks, estates and great houses—the roses which disguise the rural dunghill on which they were erected and on which the nostalgia and tourist industries rely. The celebration of these features tends to mention only *en passant*, if at all, the inequality inherent in the system and the social and environmental harm done. A majority of rural writing is adulatory rather than critical and at best neglects to highlight the costs of the long-prevailing inequality of land ownership. Even when the system's costs are introduced the relevant elements are fragmented and mentioned tangentially; here they are pulled together in approximately chronological order. Like many other English institutions, landed estates were neither designed for nor capable of producing economic growth or rural harmony. Far from it. Their role in agricultural production was only part of the story and not the main part. Estates increasingly became side effects of industrialisation and economic growth. This book demonstrates that the estate system was a drag on society and the economy rather than a boost. It tended to immobilise capital and enterprise in a landscape of pleasure for the few.

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CHAPTER 1

The Landed Interest

Abstract Ever since the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 the estate system imposed continuity on developments in rural society and on agriculture, which was for centuries the largest sector in the economy. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 was not the start of change but was a stage in the national expansion of commercial influence. The estate system was perpetuated by prolonged inflows of trading profits and the entry of new merchant personnel. They were absorbed sufficiently well for the landed interest to remain a cohesive elite which produced similar effects through time and space. Treatment of domestic servants was especially distasteful, including sexual harassment, and conditions were poor for farmworkers.

Keywords Domestic service • Estate system • Glorious Revolution
• Investment of trading profits

After the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 the most powerful positions and profitable assets in the countryside were secured by the landowning establishment. Admittedly, sales of Royalist land during the preceding Interregnum had meant that part of the old gentry had been replaced by parliamentarians up to and including Oliver Cromwell, who received the Marquis of Worcester's estates. Yet under the restored monarchy a surprising number of the recipients succeeded in hanging on to their gains.

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E. L. Jones, *Landed Estates and Rural Inequality in English History*,
Palgrave Studies in Economic History,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74869-6_1

Charles II pursued men who had signed his father's death warrant but was otherwise inclined to let sleeping dogs lie. He did not wish to brew up another rebellion. Possession was nine-tenths of the law and the legal system certainly favoured landholders as a whole. In the next century their power facilitated the enclosures whereby the poor, even the second poor (those who kept themselves just above qualifying for poor relief), were often deprived of many rights. Despite even that consolidation of land in the hands of those who already owned a lot of it, scholars nevertheless see more continuity than change. Whatever happened to individuals, the prevailing organisation of landholding was disturbed but never overthrown.

The landowner class set about re-embracing the order it had been busily threatening in twenty years of military and political turmoil. It was good at reproducing itself. Unfortunate families might fall out of the system but the basic structure of rural society persisted through thick and thin. Changes in personnel there were but it seems hardly possible to compute how many. To make sure how much real alteration in family ownership took place, as opposed to changes in the standing of individual family members, each household would need to be examined—an almost unimaginably large task, certain to be frustrated by yawning gaps in the documents. Nor did the political changes, formative though some were, betoken epochal breaks of trend in the way land was managed—and that is the element which directly influenced agricultural productivity. Given agriculture's massive share in the economy, national economic security and growth rested on its productivity. Notwithstanding the appearances presented by a host of studies, rather little may be said about husbandry trends. The reason is that England is so very varied in geology and topography, and hence in ecology, that we do not know precisely how to sum up local research and offer a consistent account through time.

In the mid-seventeenth century upstart city lawyers and merchants displayed an urge to become respectable; the more corrupt their acquiring of estates had been, the greater the urge. Those who succeeded in camouflaging their moves merged back into the landed class and welcomed Charles II with one voice. Puritans sat in the first Restoration parliament and families in what might be called Team Puritan settled back into the unified ranks of landowners with remarkable ease. The Restoration was Animal Farm: like the pigs turning into the unlovely farmers of Orwell's book, the Puritans rejoined the ruling class despite its revamped Royalist air. When members of the older gentry who had been usurped during the Interregnum later bought their land back from its new Puritan owners, this placed a burden of debt on their estates, reducing the funds they had

to invest. Royalists who completely sank under this burden during the Interregnum had been replaced but some Puritans were replaced in turn after the Restoration, in both cases by new ‘improving’ men, keen to recoup their own investments as well as raise their status. This helps to explain a measure of the agricultural advance in the middle decades of the seventeenth century. Agricultural development was already the watchword in Puritan times; at mid-century the successive editions of Walter Blith’s *The English Improver Improved* were dedicated to Protector Cromwell. Under all regimes many members of the landed interest busied themselves with farming.

A challenge to the very idea of a landed interest, and of an identifiable national interest that it might influence, was mounted by Julian Hoppit. He located differences within the landowner class by examining legislation concerning estates, enclosures and land registries and implied that the landed interest was not as strong as it seemed because many parliamentary bills concerning these topics actually failed to pass into law. The parliament was not willing to push, say, for an overarching right to enclose; enclosures were proposed and tackled only one by one. But this is surely consistent with different assessments of specific prospects by individuals rather than the absence of a corps of landowners that had interests in common. Hoppit does make a number of distinctions among categories of landowner, noting points well known in agricultural history, for instance that the interests of proprietors in arable areas were prone to diverge from those whose holdings were primarily pastoral. For a very long time it was the arable sector, fronted by what the Victorians called the ‘Voice of Norfolk,’ that tended to dominate policy. Corn Laws designed to bolster profits from growing grain favoured arable farmers but simultaneously raised the cost of feedstuffs for livestock producers. Yet it was a long time before specialised regions fully supplanted mixed farming across the country and the agricultural interest accordingly retained a general similarity.

Splitting by locality and period can proceed almost indefinitely and nullify attempts to discern underlying patterns. Admittedly, few farms were exactly the same as others. They differed in location and market access, and possessed characteristics of soil and slope that affected management and productivity in ways not obvious from an overview. Estates may be thought of as ‘bundles’ of diverse units and were in their turn extremely varied. The great historian of landownership, John Habakkuk, no slouch at economic theory, found their diversity so extreme that he preferred to work empirically, moving from one example to the next. Yet social aspirations and pressures did lead to a basic convergence of behaviour to which new entrants soon conformed.

Even at the level of agrarian politics, Hoppit's case, which includes arguing that a unified landed interest could have existed only had there been a national agricultural policy for it to react against, carries splitting to extremes. Joan Johnson, in her close study of the Gloucestershire gentry, found the opposite, stating that for centuries the gentry formed, 'a united and socially compatible body'. As far as small farmers and village labourers were concerned, landed proprietors typically faced them with something of a common opposition, mobilising against their interests and against those of the consumers of bread as a whole. Underlings were in thrall to proprietors whose decisions were barely subject to sanctions and could be, to say the least, erratic: as Terry Eagleton wrote in the *London Review of Books* about a lunatic eighteenth-century member of the Wallop family, 'the line between eccentricity and insanity in the English aristocracy has always been hard to draw'. James Lees-Milne's *People and Places* gives the inside story, sometimes inadvertently, always revealingly, of relationships and behaviour among country house owners in the twentieth century. Such people felt free of ordinary constraints.

Distinctions did exist between 'landed interest' and 'estate system'. Sometimes they were subtle and sometimes marked. Hoppit's concern is with high politics and the currents of legislation rather than their direct impact on husbandry. He acknowledges that, despite internal differences that might reach down to disputes between individual owners, the landed interest as a whole was really quite powerful, achieving important and lasting legislation like the Game Laws that appealed to most of its members. The Game Laws permitted them to lord it over their poor neighbours in virtual perpetuity and it is with respect to this form of domination that the landed interest category is least to be doubted. The system was and is both resilient and elastic. Until 1870 it barely paused in growing, for all the political and economic hazards. Right up to the present, a fraction of the oldest landed families has retained a footing through every vicissitude, the most damaging being the great agricultural depressions, the loss of heirs in war and Lloyd George's taxes. While lesser operators fell at these fences, the great lords have constantly been joined by layer upon layer of men with new money. Seventy-nine mansions were demolished on the UK mainland between 1870 and 1919, years that were followed by a massive liquidation of estate acreage, but even today certain members of England's *ancien régime* survive on the land.

Possessing sufficient non-agricultural resources and being lucky about the lifespans of male heirs were requisites for the long-term survival of family estates, while selling off standing timber in emergencies