PALGRAVE STUDIES IN ECONOMIC HISTORY

Landscape History and Rural Society in Southern England

An Economic and Environmental Perspective

Eric L. Jones

palgrave
macmillan

Palgrave Studies in Economic History

Series Editor
Kent Deng
London School of Economics
London, UK

Palgrave Studies in Economic History is designed to illuminate and enrich our understanding of economies and economic phenomena of the past. The series covers a vast range of topics including financial history, labour history, development economics, commercialisation, urbanisation, industrialisation, modernisation, globalisation, and changes in world economic orders.

More information about this series at
http://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/14632

Eric L. Jones

Landscape History and Rural Society in Southern England

An Economic and Environmental Perspective

palgrave
macmillan

Eric L. Jones
University of Buckingham
Buckingham, UK

ISSN 2662-6497 ISSN 2662-6500 (electronic)
Palgrave Studies in Economic History
ISBN 978-3-030-68615-4 ISBN 978-3-030-68616-1 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-68616-1

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2021
This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.
The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.
The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover credit: Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

For Patrick Dillon

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to John Anderson, Deborah Cassell, Patrick Dillon, Shaun Keneally and John Price for reading parts of the manuscript; to Syd Flatman for accompanying me on many site visits; and above all to my wife, Sylvia, and son, Christopher, for editing the text.

Contents

Part I Preliminaries

1 Strategic Locations 3

2 Sources: Artefacts 17

3 Sources: Documents 25

4 Post-war Time Shift 37

Part II Localities

5 Chalk Downs 47

6 Heathland 59

7 Lot Meads 79

8 Drove Roads 101

9 Colonising the Hill Country 115

10 Parkland 123

11 Resources: Fodder 143

12 Resources: Wool and Wood 157

Part III Conclusion

13 Conclusion 179

Index 193

PART I

Preliminaries

CHAPTER 1

Strategic Locations

Economic history perches uneasily, but creatively, between the abstractions of economics and the conventions of history. Environmental history follows as an uneasy adjunct of economic and agricultural history, dealing with nature, resources and the landscape. What can features on the ground tell us about economic history and ecology, about how the subjects relate and how the human habitat changed? What were the feedback effects—how did economic change modify the environment and become shaped by it in turn? The localities described in this book exemplify land-use change and reclamation, communal land management, drove roads, arable colonisation of the downs, the layout of parkland and resources including fodder, wool and wood.[1] Most occupations have left marks and signs to be sought out and interpreted. There is no need to resort to the cliché that minor sites and fading marks contain the world in a grain of sand, all that need be said is that each exhumes half-forgotten activities. They are clues rather than microcosms. It is the task of the environmental historian to pursue them and examine their consequences.

The value of ground evidence is that it sometimes provides the keys to economic and ecological processes which texts do not reveal. When texts do supply hints they are usually to be found in quite fugitive writings. Beyond what is evident in non-standard sources, conjecture may be needed. The military scholar, Liddell Hart, called this surmising what is

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2021
E. L. Jones, *Landscape History and Rural Society in Southern England*, Palgrave Studies in Economic History,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-68616-1_1

'the other side of the hill'. We also need to do something recommended in urban history: stand and watch as a town changes around us in our mind's eye, pursuing the implications at the next stage of research. Without rounded descriptions the history of the environment may be distorted and will certainly be incomplete.

Studies based purely on texts and documents may include descriptions backed by particular examples, more verisimilitude than verity; the tabulation of numerical data, ingenious but merely assumed to be faithful proxies and definitely more abstract than readable; or the biographies of single parishes. None of these approaches is entirely compelling and although a one-place study is likely to be the most persuasive, even that has limitations. Gilbert White, whose opinion commands universal respect, did say that the place most examined produces the most results. While this is true in an absolute sense it scouts the law of diminishing returns. Only the rarest of the rare among parishes, such as Kibworth, Leicestershire, is ever likely to yield adequate evidence to follow its evolution throughout every period.[2] Kibworth's documentation is utterly exceptional and serves to emphasise that the records of most villages contain gaps which have to be filled by interpolating material from other places.

Strategic Locations

A one-place study must confront questions about representativeness. How is it known that a given parish shared the experience of its neighbours, let alone of the region or country at large? I have coped with the difficulty by studying smallish clusters of parishes centred on places across Southern England where I have lived. They are my 'strategic locations'. As a geographical device it is semi-arbitrary but is rescued by covering enough cases to offset peculiarities or lapses in any one. Each cluster has some ecological unity. Administrative boundaries may break this apart, as they split up the management of land belonging to families with portfolios of property in more than one county, but on the whole, each group of parishes falls into a recognisable ecosystem.

The localities considered here in detail are in Hampshire, West Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire, with side excursions to East Berkshire, Wiltshire and Devon. Besides growing up in Andover, Hampshire, I have lived in parishes elsewhere within reach of universities where I was working: Eynsham and Kingston Bagpuize near Oxford; Stratfield Mortimer, west of Reading, and Wantage, formerly in Berkshire, now

in Oxfordshire, but brought within reach of Reading once the M4 was opened and near Exeter at Haselbury Plucknett, Somerset, and my most picturesque addresses, both in Devon, The Fishing Lodge, Deer Park, Weston and The Old Manor, Talaton.

These geographical foci all lie on the western side of south-central England, which goes a little way towards offsetting the fashion in which much of the secondary literature leans towards eastern arable England or the Midlands triangle with its impress of Parliamentary enclosure. Subjects that bear on local studies, or more pertinently draw on them, include agricultural history, agricultural economics, historical geography, landscape history, environmental history, political history and economic history. If this array seems bewildering, it should not do so, because it all relates to the development of rural society and it all inter-connects. It is a means to the ends of investigating historical problems and integrating half-remembered elements from the past.

The book therefore rests on a lattice of local histories from the counties listed, notably Andover and Hampshire more generally; the Oxford district; and Fairford, Gloucestershire, at the junction of the Upper Thames and Cotswolds, where I now live. Wiltshire is added because it is accessible from both Andover and Fairford, and is of special interest to me by virtue of family origins and my association with the Richard Jefferies Society (Jefferies was the first author to coin the term 'wildlife').[3] My doctoral thesis was partly about Herefordshire, and, although it is not convenient to cover that county here, its differences from south-central areas did expand my acquaintance with rural landscapes. Much of the knowledge was aided by bird-watching, an excellent pastime for getting into obscure corners of the landscape.

Additional locations were brought under my notice through repeated visits to naturalist friends who really knew the history of their patch and had, unassisted, earned for themselves the title of environmental historian: Colin Tubbs at Lyndhurst, Lew Lewis in the Newbury district, Patrick Dillon at Great Shefford and Ashbury and Alan Albery at Pamber. These are (some sadly were) people who declined to be pigeonholed by academic discipline. Colin and I often debated what the subject of our interest should be called, whether historical ecology or ecological (now known as environmental) history. We decided that the former meant biologists looking at the development of ecosystems, the latter historians looking at humanity's impact on and exploitation of the landscape and

wildlife. Colin was professionally an ecologist, I was an economic historian, but our joint interest was the historicised landscape. We published some papers and he wrote *The New Forest: An Ecological History* in 1968.[4] But Colin's work was ignored even by a prominent historian in the next county, who claimed that in 1970 environmental history had not been invented![5]

Seeking the genius loci of one's haunts, or claiming they are numinous, is no longer fashionable. Whereas my scholarly training certainly leads me to disregard such indefinable terms, I have enjoyed the places mentioned and empathise with people to whom they offer ethereal inspiration, such as the poet Peter Levi's achingly beautiful descriptions of the Oxford district in *The Flutes of Autumn*.

Agriculture's Prominence

The farther back one probes into the economic history of England, the greater the role of agriculture and hence of rural life.[6] The earliest national figures are the social statistics estimated by Gregory King in 1688. They show that agriculture employed 70–80 per cent of the labour force, although the economy was not then fully specialised and many people had secondary occupations. This percentage was already lower than anywhere except the mercantile Netherlands by any reasonable measure must be termed substantial. The proportion of farmworkers continued to shrink but for centuries to come agriculture remained the largest single occupation. Aggregate statistics are few but until the late nineteenth century agricultural land, labour and capital constituted a very large proportion of the economy, even allowing for the fact that the numbers are not always comparable because they sometimes relate to the whole of Great Britain and sometimes include Wales jointly with England. One of the most telling statistics is that into the 1830s land and farm capital amounted to 63 per cent of Great Britain's national capital. More recent attempts at calculation have been hampered for lack of new sources and have not diminished the immense relative size of agriculture before the nineteenth century, when industrial capital began to grow exceptionally fast and farming suffered from the Great (arable) Depression at the end of the century.

The orders of magnitude in the figures are acceptable enough and of self-evident importance for national wealth and well-being. Inequality of ownership was marked: at the 'New Domesday' in the 1870s over half

of England was owned in estates of over 1000 acres by as few as 10,911 people. Parts of the estates were given over to the owners' pleasure while the everyday business of agriculture was carried on by tenant farmers. Outside this system lay the remaining privately owned land, in addition to which as late as the mid-twentieth century common land amounted to 1.5 million acres in England and Wales.[7] This was the residue after the centuries' long advances of enclosure and encroachment. Although constituting only 2.5 per cent of the total acreage it was still a large absolute area, widely dispersed through the two countries. Commercial agriculture's economic prominence, coupled with the hangover of communal organisation, make the land sector of outstanding historical importance and a centrepiece of attention in this book.

Angles of Approach

Ground evidence hints at how old methods of exploitation operated, and what natural resources were available for the mere effort of collecting them—hard scrabble tasks involving arcane skills that are difficult or impossible to deduce from abstract principles. John Hughes got this right when he pointed out to sceptical fellow economists that the tools of neoclassical economics do not explain everything.[8] The world is too idiosyncratic for that. The aim of economics, as Hughes knew as well as anyone, is to learn just how much of the variance in behaviour can be accounted for by price theory, which I have heard suggested is about 60 per cent. What, then, of the other 40 per cent, all those tiny disequilibria that economists sweep under the carpet? If this is too formal a portrayal of what really happens at the hands of economic historians, who are more attracted to everyday features than are professional economists, they too play up the main currents and market fluctuations of the past. The force of little things, like those resurrected in this book, is easy for anyone to miss.

A telling parallel or forerunner is found in the work of Joan Thirsk, who had not the least interest in received 'theory' but had worked at Bletchley Park and was no backwoods antiquarian. When she turned to historical research she scoured documents about the agrarian past, following up indications about minor products that she kept on noticing but which others had skipped over. She did not rely on well-known sources or construct series about 'major' changes but put her findings together to portray the underside of agriculture.[9] The most conspicuous

movements usually reported of the land sector reflect the preoccupations of late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries farming writers and by extension those who have been over-influenced by them, whether subconsciously or not (*mea culpa*). What other scholars had missed through looking too fixedly at the big, 'capitalist' farmers and the best-recorded statistics turned out to be a sizeable chunk of the rural economy, especially before, say, 1750.

Thirsk discussed less familiar crops and plants, anything that was tried out in the hope it might become profitable. Her work is an antidote to what is in effect the present-mindedness of agricultural historians who skate over, if they ever acknowledge, the intricate labour expended on the infinite productions of the natural world. The secondary literature continues—understandably in the case of textbooks—to be keyed to the main topics that attract the current history profession. There, the attitude seems to be that individually minor products which are hard to quantify must accordingly have been trivial. This is far from correct, certainly in aggregate, as will be shown here with respect to heathland among other topics.

Academic approaches to environmental history are now broadening but biologists have never been very interested in human history and historians are not typically attracted to biology. Despite environmental history's emergence as a sub-discipline in its own right, general histories have yet to integrate it as a matter of course. Consider an edited book on the seventeenth-century county community which ignores economic and agricultural history and reaches the very last page before declaring that studies of topography's relationship to the economy, society and politics might well be revisited along the lines of Hoskins, Everitt and Underwood— and that such a study might be called 'environmental history'![10] The three authors named had all come up with creative theses integrating disparate facts and ideas; the profession has spent the last thirty years trying to amend or demolish their theses, which would be more fitting if equally broad alternatives were put forward.

More remains to be done if believable pictures of past landscapes and occupations are ever to be painted. Thirsk had first-mover advantage; later work has been less comprehensive and less original. Yet when all is said and done, her research was based on documents and printed sources. Investigations would benefit by adding scrutiny of the ground and considering ecology, besides drawing on insights that older inhabitants of the countryside can sometimes provide. In that respect the approach of the

American historical novelist, Conrad Richter, has always seemed a model. Rather than dumping library notes into his books, he deliberately quizzed old people in order to gauge the spirit of the times when they were young. He became aware that ordinary people in the past had not owned much furniture or many household goods; their surroundings were Spartan, like their speech and values. It was the same in England, contrary to the televisual world where everybody is dressing up all the time—as opposed to the reality of wearing cast-offs and with no one fashion ruling at a given time. The much-cited probate inventories seem to offset this bias but may give an unbalanced impression because the median inventory catalogues the possessions of people who were still some way from the poorest of the poor.[11]

How can the lost world of the past be penetrated? The short answer is that it can be retrieved only elliptically. Talking to old countrymen and women is one approach. The oral histories of Suffolk by George Ewart Evans, only a decade older than Joan Thirsk, show what can be done. His compilations of village lore reached into the past by analogy, after the fashion of anthropologists who deduce human behaviour through interrogating remote tribal societies. Admittedly there are limits: the memories of old people and the knowledge they gleaned from their parents and grandparents can take us only so far. Country people may have authentic rustic accents but their experience does not go back inordinately far. The oldest informants I have talked to were a Hampshire farmer and a Wiltshire farmer, both of whom could just recall as children the dreadful harvest of 1879. About that date, Richard Jefferies was tapping memories from the Napoleonic War years, two generations before his own time but he was already too late to make contact with periods before that. It might seem otherwise when reading of the sequence of acquaintanceships certain people claim, hopping and skipping back from individual to individual to someone touched for the King's Evil, but those boasts are symbolic and without much content. Old dialect terms may persist but do not amount to narratives about earlier times. Yet the tune of the past still registers; the pace of life, its laboriousness and its inconveniences emerge to a degree from the reminiscences of people who can 'feel' earlier times because they worked on the land during the threadbare years of the interwar depression. Wood-carvers who replicate the strokes and methods of medieval craftsmen claim even more plausibly to enter the minds of their predecessors.

We must try to capture the tone of the past and round out what less formal sources and physical traces tell us. It is important to steep ourselves in rural ways and make sure to observe such things. I was struck when reviewing a collection on agricultural history which emphasised the storage of grain that none of the authors seemed to have seen or heard of granaries raised up protectively on staddle stones, of which in one county alone 300 remain today. They were looking through the wrong end of the telescope and remained unaware of a formerly routine method of pest control. The practices of less commercial societies offer helpful views. Following the fall of communism in 1989, farming in Eastern Europe gave insights into methods abandoned in the West. In the 1990s, when I lived on a farm at Wantage, Oxfordshire, the farmer could not find an English machine capable of reaping the long-straw grain he grew for thatching. He had to buy a newly made but essentially old-fashioned one from Poland. Even with this machine the only people who would work for him all day on the long-straw harvest were retired farmworkers and other old men. Younger men would not join in. It was testimony to how laborious farm tasks had once been.

Purely documentary and written sources will not take us as deeply into the past as we may wish to go. Landscape evidence and residual practices simply must be included. Having worked on the one-time agricultural significance of gorse (as the chapter on heathland shows), I was chastened to read Chris Howkin's *Gorse, Broom and Heathlands* (2007) in which he teases out the history of cultivating gorse and broom on the Surrey heaths. Faced with patchy evidence in a district where the original commoners' economy had been ruptured by enclosure, undercut when coal replaced traditional sources of fuel and half-obliterated by the mass planting of conifers, Howkins misses no line of enquiry that might clinch what used to take place. He uses signs in the landscape, knowledge of botany, knowledge of chemistry, old testimony, old tools, old documents, old maps, everything, including above all a workaday intelligence that combines and makes sense of the fragments.

Finding something new in a landscape about which so much has been written was hard even in the 1950s and 1960s. By 'new' is not meant something no one else has ever seen but a site or process that had been studied only piecemeal, as if it were a single, unrepeated instance never elevated into a class of phenomena with common roots and broader significance. To illustrate how difficult it is to find something which falls into this category, I claim to have come upon only three examples myself:

the sites of previous use denoted by banked-and-ditched gorse enclosures in the New Forest; the locations of village and town fires which became visible only on noticing that whole blocks of buildings dating from certain early periods were simply missing and the innumerable examples of 'road capture' where private interests had forced awkward diversions and bends on the road system. These finds were unexpected, not least in their wider implications. By discussing traces on the ground and the remnants of dying arrangements I hope to show more broadly here that we have been neglecting vital means of assessing the past. At the risk of giving the impression they are isolated examples and not fungible—not repeated over wide areas—the examples are deliberately drawn from on the spot experience. A little personal material in most chapters will indicate how I alighted on the instances, before debating them at greater length. The autobiographical element seldom stays in the foreground. Its aim is to introduce an element of realism which is not thought appropriate in the stylised formats of academic articles. Showing how I went from the ground to the documents and literature and back again underlines the value of simple observation.

Topics and Themes

Writing this book has impressed on me that overlooked features and obscure corners of the landscape can indeed contribute to broad historical understanding, above all of economic history. The chapters deal with specific types of landscape and resources, typically from the starting point of what was learned from remains on the ground. They lead in a variety of directions, some of them unforeseen in view of their prosaic origins in local field work and ground evidence. The themes include reflecting on how once-prevalent communal systems of land management worked. One chapter concentrates on the unfamiliar, but formerly widespread, variant of such arrangements called lot meads, where rights to mow the hay were reallocated every year in ceremonies involving the drawing of tokens corresponding to strips of grass. By raising questions about institutional change this shows just how far the prompting of landscape features may lead.

The opening four chapters are background. After the introduction in this chapter, the second chapter deals with physical sources installed in the landscape, that is, artefacts. After that, comes a discussion of documentary sources. The fourth chapter advises taking care not to assume,

however subliminally, that the countryside of one's youth was the product of ageless, unidirectional trends. A common tendency is certainly to take the context as given, without thinking more about it. But as soon as it is realised that the local scene differs geographically from others, an awakening from unconscious reverie can happen quite quickly. The observer's vantage point is soon located in space. What is less apparent, at least at the conscious level, is a dimension beyond the geographical, which is to say the chronological.

Everybody is aware that their time is different from that of their parents or grandparents. It is taken for granted, without further ado. The landscape may be understood at the back of the mind as a result of historical processes but reflection is needed to fix the phases of change that culminated in the scene before one. Even with a rather specialist education in geography and economic history, it took me some time to recognise the stages that had created the countryside in which I grew up. The realisation was obscured by the brooding hangover of the Second World War and in the Hampshire chalk lands by the peculiar dominance there of prehistoric archaeology over other approaches to landscape history. The bits of the jigsaw were there, they just needed the penny to drop. As Goethe said, 'All the pieces in the hand, lacking, alas! the inner band'.

Before struggling to understand the phases of agricultural prosperity and depression that had succeeded one another through the years, I needed to grasp the significance of the moment when I became an observer. Eventually it dawned on me to ask whether rural history (or its North West Hampshire segment) had experienced a crucial shift. The conclusion was that it had, because in the mid-twentieth century it was fast leaving behind centuries of sheep-fold, horse plough and staffs of forty men on any middle-sized farm, to enter the world of ever-larger farm machinery driven by ever fewer hands. In some ways the question is artificial because the commercial agriculture of lowland England has been changing for centuries. Yet there really does seem to have been a remarkably abrupt transition when long-lasting methods and ways of life gave way to more mechanical, more suburban trajectories. Friends of my own age and interests agree. The transition impressed itself on us because, as naturalists, we were reluctant witnesses to the brutal effects of subsidised, mechanised farming on wildlife and the environment. The fourth chapter, Post-war Time Shift, examines this change in detail as it arrived on the Hampshire chalk.