

Agricultural rent in England, 1690–1914

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Introduction

Rent is integral to our way of life in the twentieth century. Almost everyone over the age of eighteen must have had some experience of paying rent, either for a house, an apartment, or for some other form of property; and the principles behind paying rent are not so far removed from the principles behind mortgage repayments. In other words a sum of money is required to pass from the tenant (or mortgage holder) to the landlord (or mortgage lender) at regular intervals. Failure to fulfil the terms of the contract (by non-payment or inadequate payment) may lead, within strictly defined legal limits, to dispossession. In this case the landlord will evict the tenant, or the mortgage lender will foreclose and claim the property. So much is clear, and most of us are well aware of the terms under which such contracts normally operate. In the past the position was different, but not so materially different as we might expect. Some of the terminology has disappeared: we no longer have lifeleaseholds, three-life leases, customary tenancies, or copyholds, but the basic relationship of a money rent paid regularly to a landlord, under conditions agreeable to both parties, goes back many centuries.

Despite this long history, surprisingly little is known about long-run trends in agricultural rent. For hundreds of years farmers and landlords have agreed rents, and money has changed hands. On individual farms and estates a good deal is known about these contractual arrangements, but the total picture to which they contributed is far less clear. We know all too little about long-run movements in rents in England over long periods. This is, to say the least, surprising. Considerable effort has been devoted over the past thirty years or so to collecting an array of statistics on wages, prices, weights and measures, and a host of other agrarian subjects.¹ By contrast, the figures for rent are meagre, and almost entirely lack any systematic form. Volumes

¹ J. Thirsk (ed.), *The Cambridge Agrarian History of England and Wales, IV, 1500–1640* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 814–70; Thirsk, *Ag Hist* (1984/5), II, pp. 815–902. Mingay *Ag Hist*, pp. 972–1155.

v and vi of the *Cambridge Agrarian History of England and Wales*, covering the period 1640–1850, and widely recognised as the definitive studies of the subject for those two hundred years, contain only passing references to rent. Nor have any other studies attempted to fill the gap. Yet our understanding of rent is likely to affect our understanding of the whole basis of economic and social relationships in the countryside, and of economic relationships more generally.

Rent, we may conclude, has been the large missing number for long-run quantified agrarian history. Long-run price series have been available for many years, and indexes have been constructed from them.² Similarly we have had long-run wage series and indexes and, in recent years, indications of the course of capital development.³ These various series and indexes include separate schedules for agriculture, yet the income from one factor of production – the income from land itself – continues to elude us. We hope in this book to fill the missing gap, at least for the period 1690–1914. This does not mean that we present a radical revision of all that economic historians have ever believed about agricultural rent. That was never likely, and was never anticipated. What we have tried to do is to give substantive backing to what is already known about the general trend in agricultural rent, to give it in graphic and numeric form, and thereby to provide the large missing number. Having provided, we then attempt to assess critically the implications for an understanding of agricultural change and for change in the economy more generally.

In pursuit of our theme, we begin in chapter 1 with a discussion of rent, what it was, how it was assessed, and how it was collected. We have a few illusions to shatter. The stereotypical picture of large farms, rack rents, and bucolic dinners, needs to be tempered to a reality in which small farms and beneficial leasing arrangements persisted almost into the twentieth century in some parts of the country. Above all, we highlight some of the practical reasons that make the collection and analysis of ‘rents’ rather more complex than might ostensibly seem to be the case. We also emphasise the extent to which rent was a matter of negotiation, on an individual basis, between tenant and landlord (or agent). Whatever Adam Smith and the classical economists may have argued, bargains were struck according to perceived

² See for example the many price indexes included in B. R. Mitchell and P. Deane (eds.), *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1962), pp. 471–7, 484–9, 494–8. See also P. K. O’Brien, ‘Agriculture and the home market for English industry, 1660–1820’, *English Historical Review*, C, no. 397 (1985), 773–800.

³ On wages at a very rudimentary level see Mitchell and Deane, *Abstract*, pp. 348–52. For capital see B. A. Holderness, ‘Agriculture, 1770–1860’, and C. H. Feinstein, ‘Agriculture’, in C. H. Feinstein and S. Pollard (eds.), *Studies in Capital Formation in the United Kingdom 1750–1920* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 9–34, 267–80, 429–30, 433–4, 437–8, 444–5, 448–9, 452–3.

economic conditions and almost in defiance of any clear notions of accountancy.

In chapter 2 we ask what contemporaries knew about rent. Our survey of material produced by contemporary reporters such as Arthur Young, by the Board of Agriculture, and by essayists writing in the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, suggests that contemporary understanding of rent levels was, at best, vague until well into the nineteenth century. Reporters had considerable difficulty in persuading farmers to tell them anything about their rents; indeed, in the 1990s we probably know more about eighteenth-century rents collectively than was the case in the 1790s, purely because estate documents have been deposited in record offices and opened to the public in the second half of the twentieth century. Lack of information did not stop contemporaries from attempting to gather data, or from trying to produce workable estimates of rent, but this was never on anything like a systematic basis prior to the 1890s.

The lack of hard data has continued to cause problems for historians in the course of the twentieth century, as we argue in chapter 3. Even though various attempts have been made in recent years to interpret trends in rents, either on a long-term national or regional level, or by examining a number of estates over large areas. None has been particularly successful, and we can have relatively little confidence in them. An alternative way of approaching rents is to seek proxies for them from other sources. As we show, however, on the basis of a discussion of the social surveys of contemporary commentators such as Gregory King, and in relation to the eighteenth-century Land Tax and the post-1798 Income Tax, there really are no adequate substitutes. It is for this reason that we believe a rent index can be constructed only by intensive use of contemporary source materials.

The source materials are now widely available, but chapter 4 looks at what should be the determining parameters of a rent index. This immediately propels us into the complex problems of utilising what is, for our purposes, usually incomplete data. We set out to gather material reflecting every area of the country in terms of broad agricultural practice, land use, soil types, and so on, but expectation and reality rapidly came into conflict. We had not appreciated just how widespread beneficial leasing continued to be well into the nineteenth century, and since it was not possible to find a suitable multiplier to convert the customary rents from these contracts into rack-rent equivalents we had to omit large areas of the country. Rack rents were our obvious source of information, but we still had to decide the most appropriate unit of measure: the farm, the field, or the estate. In the end it proved relatively easy to lay down the parameters into which a rent index

should fit, but what could actually be collected represented a compromise some distance from the ideal.

Chapters 5 to 7 cover the production of the database from which the rent index has been derived. The data are drawn (in far from equal proportions) from three main sets of material: estate archives across the country; rental series constructed for and in conjunction with the 1890s Royal Commission on Agriculture; and results produced by other historians working on related topics which include agricultural rent. Our work on estate records is set out in chapter 5, which details the selection and sampling process and looks at why we did, or did not, use material from particular archives. It also looks at how we recorded the information, and the problems we met in relation to establishing the acreages on which rents were assessed and collected. In chapter 6 we look at rental material made available as a result of government inquiries into agriculture conducted at various points in the nineteenth century. The inquiries of the 1830s provide little usable information – although some rather general material – but the Royal Commission of the 1890s turns out to be far more helpful, partly because of the much more systematic way in which material was collected over a far longer period of time than just the 1890s. In addition, the agricultural conditions of the period inspired a number of other commentators to prepare their own ‘rental histories’. In this context the work of R. J. Thompson, the ninth Duke of Bedford, J. C. Steele, and L. L. Price all provided additional evidence. Critically, however, we point out that since the inquiries were concerned with the agricultural depression, they concentrated attention on the most depressed areas, with a possible bias towards the eastern part of the country. We try to allow for the likely inflection in the index that this may cause, without abandoning the data thrown up by the inquiries. In chapter 7 we examine the written biographies of estates to see what information contained within them we can use in the rent index. Our general conclusion is that, although many of the studies appear to provide useful data, for one reason or another – and usually because of a shortage of acreage figures – the material they contain does not fit the parameters we set. Even so, we have added material to the index wherever possible.

Chapter 8 contains our main findings, presented in a series of graphs, designed first to indicate the trends we have found, and then to test them against the conclusions drawn by commentators from Arthur Young in the eighteenth century to R. C. Allen in the late twentieth century. We also compare them with the findings of various other commentators, to try to establish the magnitude of accuracy and error. We are satisfied that they represent the best possible indication of the pattern of agricultural rents in England between 1690 and 1914. In chapter 9 we refine the findings by

looking particularly at how the information enables us to examine times of plenty and times of dearth, as well as to examine regional variations in long-term trends.

Finally, in chapters 10 and 11 we set the conclusions to be drawn from the rent index into the broader picture of agricultural history and the national economy over the period 1690–1914. In chapter 10 we look at the reasons why rents were likely to move in particular directions at particular times, especially in relation to other demands on the farmer including labourers' wages. We then discuss the way in which the index moves in line with, or deviates from, price and wage indicators and the long-term rate of interest. In chapter 11 we move from the longer to the shorter term and disaggregate the whole period into sub-periods in which we test the findings against the broad picture of agriculture in times of boom and times of gloom.

This is a study which almost certainly could not have been done in the past with the kind of magnitude, precision, and detail that we have achieved. Much of our evidence is derived from the papers of landed families, papers which were, until recent times, private property maintained in private hands. As landed families have deposited their archives in public repositories during the second half of the twentieth century an enormous bank of data has become available which still has many secrets to yield up. Similarly important has been technology. The speed and precision with which our data was extracted from the archives and then analysed is a remarkable tribute to the power of modern computer technology. Undertaking this study without such a facility would have been prohibitively expensive. Bringing the data and the technology together in the way that we have done here also opens up new perspectives, some of which are hinted at in the closing chapters, and which we have begun to explore elsewhere.⁴ English agriculture still has many secrets to reveal, but the archives and the technology exist to ensure that they remain secrets no longer.

⁴ M.E. Turner, J. V. Beckett, and B. Afton, 'Taking stock: farmers, farm records, and agricultural output in England 1700–1850', *AgHR*, 44, 1 (1996), 21–34.