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978-0-521-56859-3 - Agricultural Revolution in England: The Transformation of the Agrarian Economy 1500-1850

Mark Overton

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**This book is the first text on English agriculture between 1500 and 1850. Taking a fresh look at the subject, the author combines new evidence with recent findings from the specialist literature, to argue that the agricultural revolution took place in the century after 1750. The book begins with a description of sixteenth-century farming and an analysis of its regional structure. It goes on to argue that the agricultural revolution consisted of two related transformations. The first was a transformation in output and productivity brought about by a complex set of changes in farming practice, which allowed England to avoid a 'Malthusian Trap' in the eighteenth century. The second was a transformation of the agrarian economy and society, including a series of related developments in marketing, landholding, field systems, property rights, enclosure and social relations. This latter set of changes led to the emergence by the nineteenth century of the distinctly English rural class structure of landlord, tenant farmer and agricultural labourer.**

**Written specifically for students, this book will be invaluable to anyone interested in English economic and social history, or the history of agriculture. A comprehensive bibliography and a guide to further reading are provided to help the reader pursue the subject in more detail.**

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*Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography*

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# AGRICULTURAL REVOLUTION IN ENGLAND

The transformation of the agrarian economy  
1500–1850

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**MARK OVERTON**

Professor of Economic and Social History  
University of Exeter



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## Preface

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Agrarian history is currently split into two camps: one primarily concerned with the activity of farming (sometimes referred to as ‘cows and ploughs’ agricultural history), and the other with a rural history that is more concerned with the wider social and cultural aspects of the countryside. Studies of the ‘agricultural revolution’ (and most of my own research) have fallen into the ‘cows and ploughs’ category and this has undoubtedly influenced the approach of this book. But despite these influences I have tried to extend from the *agricultural* (‘the science and art of cultivating the soil’) to the *agrarian* (‘relating to the land’), in order to widen the terms of reference for considering the ‘agricultural revolution’. This has meant that I have relied on the work of others for many parts of the book, and I am grateful to those historians whose ideas I have absorbed since the 1970s. They are too numerous to list; some of them appear in the bibliography, but there are many others.

The day after the text of the book was completed the editor of a well-known historical journal asked me to referee a manuscript for publication. It took the form that many articles do: an opening paragraph setting out the established view, followed by new ideas and evidence overturning that view. The opening paragraph of the article was almost identical to a paragraph in this book. This was a salutary reminder that our knowledge and understanding of the past is constantly changing, and, while I hope the main conclusions to this book may survive for a little longer than that paragraph, I also hope the flow of articles on agricultural and agrarian history may long continue.

I have not encumbered the text with footnotes, but most of my sources are listed in the *Bibliography*, and the *Guide to further reading* should cut a pathway into them. The sources of quotations are given, and, more importantly, the sources of the tables and figures, so that those who so wish can rework the original material.

This book has its origins in an undergraduate lecture course, which

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started in Cambridge and continued in Newcastle, and I am grateful to the successive generations of students for giving me the opportunity to develop my ideas and arguments. The SSRC (as it then was) funded me for a year during 1984–5 when research on the book began. I was also fortunate to hold a Visiting Fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford, during 1992–3, when much of the text was written. I must thank Olive Teesdale, Eric Quenett, Gary Haley, and especially Ann Rooke, for drawing the diagrams. I owe an enormous debt to my long-suffering publishers who have been waiting patiently for this book for over a decade.

Meemee has been forced to share me with this book for as long as she has known me. Her support has been invaluable, not only in reading the entire text several times and correcting the proofs, but in creating an environment which made work possible.

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## A note on weights, measures, money and boundaries

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The weights and measures used in this book are the ones contemporaries used. The standard unit for grain was the bushel (roughly 36 litres) of 4 pecks or 8 gallons, and 8 bushels made a quarter (about 2.9 hectolitres). The weight of a bushel of grain can vary, but a bushel of wheat weighs about 56 pounds or roughly 25 kilograms, a bushel of barley 48 pounds, and a bushel of oats 38 pounds. The unit of measurement for area was the acre, equivalent to about 0.4 hectares; linear measurement was by the mile of about 1.6 kilometers. When area, weight and volume are related in measures of yield, 20 bushels per acre (the average wheat yield in England around 1800) is roughly equivalent to half a ton per acre, which is about 500 kilograms per acre, 1.2 tonnes per hectare, and 17.4 hectolitres per hectare.

Before 1971 the English pound (£) consisted of 20 shillings (s.), each shilling comprised 12 pence (d.), and a penny comprised 4 farthings.

The counties and their boundaries referred to in the book are as they existed before 1974.