INTRODUCTION

Tithe, tithe commutation, tithe surveys

Traditionally farmers were required to give a proportion, usually about a tenth, of the gross annual produce from their land for the support of the Church (Evans, 1976). This method of financing the Church was popular with few in the parishes of England and Wales, was liable to abuse by both oppressive claims of tithe owners and flagrant evasions by tithe payers and it fomented rural unrest. Moreover, by the end of the eighteenth century, the rural base of tithe collection was becoming both anachronistic and unfair as increasing proportions of the nation's wealth were generated by industries which had no obligation to pay tithe. Furthermore, those farmers who invested in expensive agricultural improvements to produce more crops and livestock had to pay more tithe than their less enterprising neighbours. The Church was a sleeping partner in these capital improvements, took none of the risks but nonetheless received its tenth of the profits. Local parsons were caricatured as avaricious, grasping capitalists, more concerned with amassing wealth than with saving souls (Fig. 1).

The Tithe Commutation Act of 1836, one of a number of great reforms enacted by Parliament during the 1830s, commuted tithe to a fluctuating money payment based on an average of the actual value of tithes paid in each parish or township over the previous five years. This sum was then apportioned among the properties of each district according to the land use of each field or farm. Inquiries were conducted under the Act in 14,829 separate tithe districts (usually a parish in southern England and a township in the north) which revealed that some tithe remained to be commuted in more than 12,000 tithe districts in England and Wales. In most of these (some 11,800 districts) commutation was effected by map and schedule of apportionment. Together these constitute what is commonly known as the 'parish tithe survey'. The nature of tithes, the process of commutation and the characteristics of tithe documents are discussed in Chapters 1–4 of *The tithe surveys of England and Wales*.

Reconstructing nineteenth-century landscape and farming patterns using tithe surveys

The value of tithe surveys as sources of information for historical inquiries has been long appreciated; they were being used by agricultural commentators within a few years of their compilation and have since been employed in many hundreds of historical studies of past

1 'The Vicar': a political satire (after Woodward) published by W. Holland, London, 1790. Beneath the picture is etched:
Then the Vicar
Full of fees customary, with his burying gloves;
Jealous of his rights, and apt to quarrel;
Claiming his paltry penny farthing tithes
E'en at the Lawyers price

land use, field systems, farming and land tenure. Many of these contributions to our understanding of nineteenth-century England and Wales are reviewed in Chapters 5–8 of *The tithe surveys of England and Wales*.

In a short prospective section in the concluding chapter of that book, Hugh Prince and I set out the following brief rationale for reconstructing mid-nineteenth-century rural landscapes of England and Wales. We noted that the middle years of the nineteenth century have been acclaimed as a period of capital intensive or high farming (Perry, 1981). These decades, we said, have been considered to mark the culmination of two centuries or more of great technical improvement in agriculture, of improvements made possible by the introduction of new farm implements, of improved breeds of livestock and of new methods of conserving and increasing soil fertility by adopting new crop rotations and applying new kinds of fertilisers. Changes in farming technique were accompanied by an intensification of farming on land already occupied, and by an extension of cultivation to land that was formerly waste. At the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign, the new husbandry was very much an accomplished fact. In most parts of England, communal grazing on the fallow field and on the stubble after harvest had disappeared as the exchange and consolidation of scattered holdings in open fields was nearing completion. At the same time, the reclamation of many tracts of heath, waste and unimproved grazings was approaching its furthest limits; draining and embanking were proceeding in the remaining waterlogged areas; while in parks and on land of little value for agriculture, hundreds of acres of woodland were being planted every year.

Soon after the tithe survey of England and Wales was effectively completed, fresh stimuli to agricultural change appeared. From about 1840 onwards, for example, a number of developments improved the competitive position of clay land farmers and began to mask the previously marked distinction between the cold, heavy clay lands and the warmer light soil areas of the country. Really effective drainage, the only feasible technical solution to the expense, uncertainty and inefficiency of the old three-course clay land arable system, was made possible with the production of cheap tile drains and the availability of financial assistance. Also, in the middle years of the nineteenth century, a sound scientific base for agriculture was being developed and the increasing use of bone meal, the importation of guano and the purchase of feedstuffs showed that the farmer was beginning to heed the advice so readily made available to him in contemporary didactic literature. Wheat yields, which had remained fairly level during the first three decades of the century, rose markedly after about 1840 (Healy and Jones, 1962). Finally, the extension of the railway network after 1840 had far-reaching effects on the agriculture of this country. Markets for products were widened and regional specialisation was facilitated, whilst manures and fertilisers could be more efficiently and cheaply distributed.

The tithe surveys picture the nation's rural landscape just before these later transformations occurred, at a time early in the expansion of the urban–industrial food market and before the great Victorian extension of the urban area over the countryside. Indeed, the post-1840 advance in agriculture was in no small measure assisted by the Tithe Commutation Act which removed an iniquitous tax on the produce of land and so dismantled a further barrier to improvement. Tithe surveys tell us little, however, about the people who lived and worked in these landscapes. Nor do they contain much information on the

demand side of the production equation, or on the flows of working and investment capital which sustained agricultural activities. Tithe surveys provide an essentially static picture, a characterisation of the consequences of a myriad of unknown, individual management decisions.

In a retrospective commentary on *An historical geography of England before A.D. 1800* (Cambridge, 1936), Professor H. C. Darby wrote: 'a second group of sources that cry aloud for attention is the body of Tithe Surveys made on a parish basis in the years around 1840' (Darby, 1960, p. 154). He reviewed a number of pioneer analyses of the tithe documents and declared 'well would it be if such work could be extended to give us as complete a map of England about 1840 as possible' (Darby, 1960, p. 154). A principal contention of this *Atlas and index* is that without such a map the geography of nineteenth-century England and Wales can be only partially understood. Since 1960 considerable advances have been made with this source and indeed the *New historical geography of England* (Cambridge, 1973) contains a number of maps based upon tithe survey evidence (Harley, 1973). At the commencement of this project in 1978, sufficient work had been completed to enable broad regional contrasts in agriculture at mid-century to be recognised but the greater part of England and Wales still awaited detailed investigation to establish more precisely the patterns of farming and the characteristics of rural landscapes. A majority of these previous studies (reviewed in *The tithe surveys of England and Wales*, Chapters 6 and 7) have plotted land use field-by-field from tithe apportionments and maps mainly for East Anglia, the Home Counties and southern England. This concentration of activity reflects both the good coverage of tithe surveys in these areas and also the interests of the Department of Geography at University College, London, where many of these students were based. In total these forty and more workers have prepared land use maps of some six million acres and it is contended that the point has been reached beyond which the repetition of such studies of the detailed interdigitations of land use decline in usefulness (Kain, 1979a). On the other hand, data in the tithe files discussed in the following section of this Introduction are at once sufficiently detailed to produce a vivid picture of the rural landscape of England and can also throw more light on the nature of farming at mid-century than a field-by-field map of arable land. The files are also the most neglected of tithe survey documents. Although one fifth of them had been examined for various purposes at the commencement of this project, fully 85 per cent of the farming data awaited transcription and analysis when we began work to collect information on the nature of tithes and the process of tithe commutation for *The tithe surveys of England and Wales* and to compile this *Atlas and index*.

Tithe files

A separate tithe file was opened for each of the 14,829 districts where inquiries were made under the Tithe Commutation Act. All the files are now in the custody of the Public Record Office at Class IR18 and it is these which provide data for the set of maps published in this volume and it is their contents which are the subject of the two indexes printed in this book. Tithe files are described in greater detail in *The tithe surveys of England and Wales*, pp. 103–12 and 141–5. In outline the files contain a record of the process of commutation as it was effected in each tithe district, the papers and correspondence that were generated,

minutes of meetings that were held, records of inquiries that were conducted, drafts of and reports on agreements for tithe commutation, notes relating to the imposition of a compulsory award if agreement could not be achieved and papers concerning the apportionment of rent-charge once its amount had been confirmed. Not all these categories of papers were generated at every place or still remain in every file. All tithe files have been weeded, many in the two years of 1911 and 1912, but without any obvious rationale. In a few places the weeding has been quite savage; some Shropshire files, for example, are quite empty and bear an enigmatic note on the outside cover that all papers were 'valueless' and have, therefore, been discarded. On the other hand some Somerset files contain scores of closely written pages describing disputed customary modus payments in lieu of tithes.

On the basis of their general contents, the whole body of tithe files can be divided into three broad categories:

Category 1: files for 2,096 districts where tithe was no longer payable in 1836 or was redeemed or about to be redeemed by direct merger in the land.

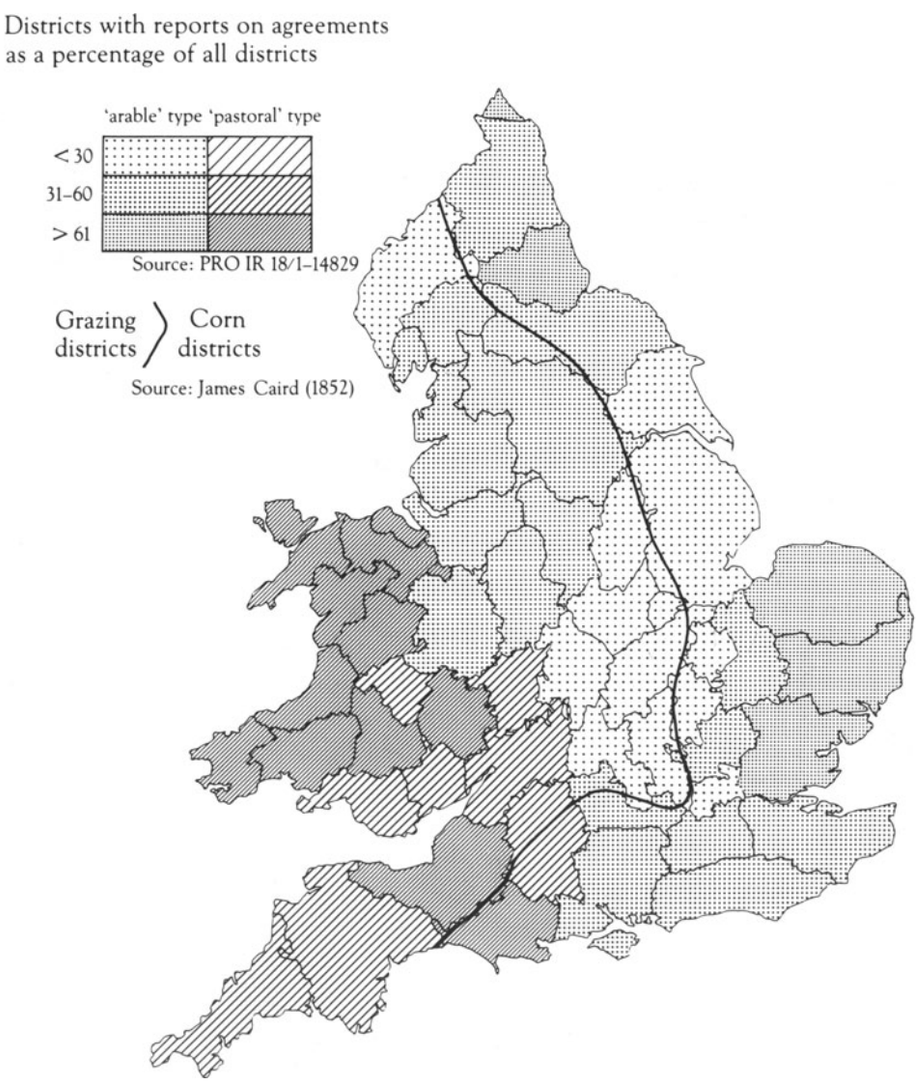
Category 2: files for 5,993 districts where tithe was commuted by compulsory award.

Category 3: files for 6,740 districts where tithe owners and tithe payers entered into a voluntary agreement for commutation by apportionment. These agreements were usually confirmed by the Tithe Commission but in about 400 places they were replaced by compulsory awards.

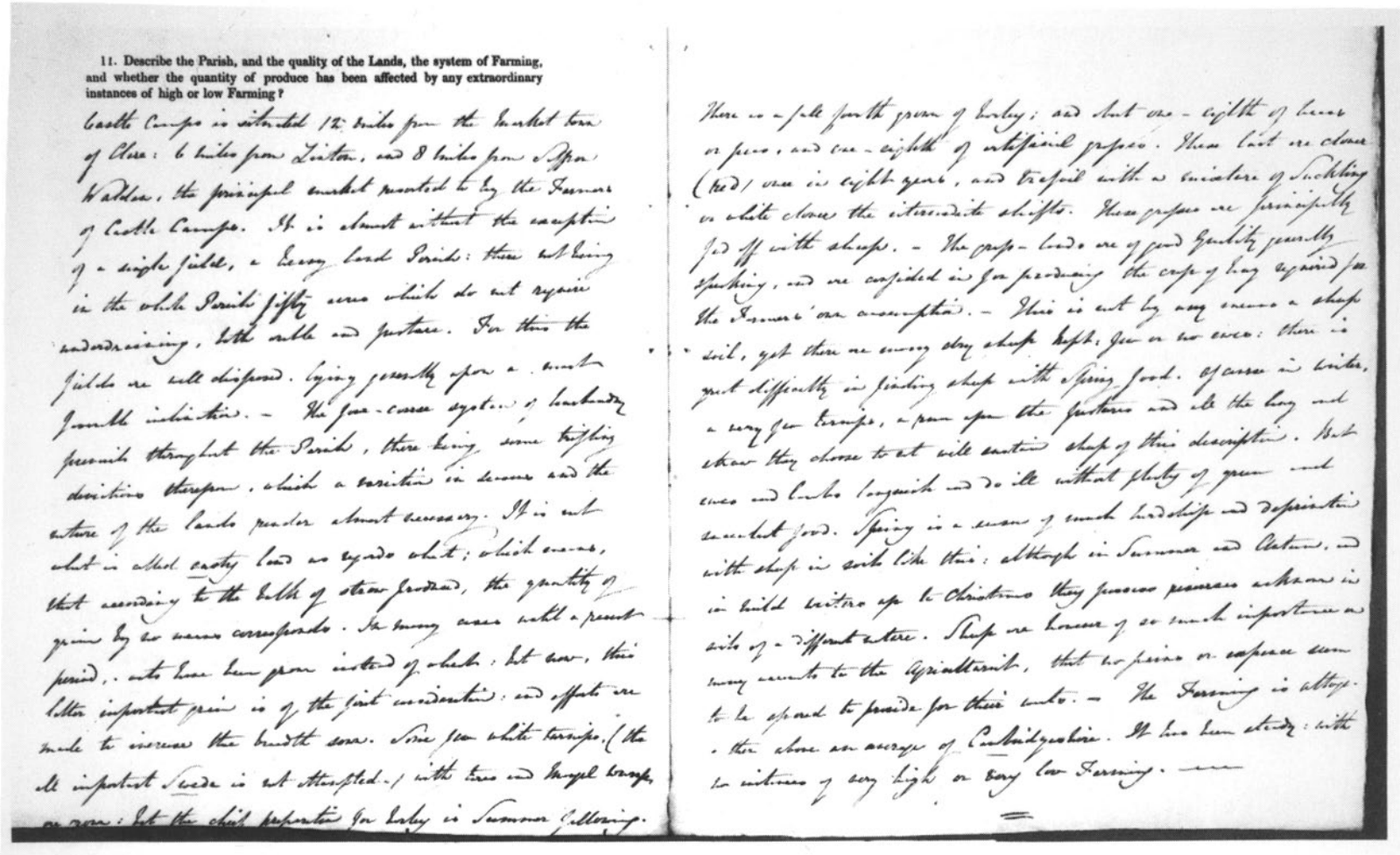
One of the commonest reasons for tithe exemption (category 1 files) was the extinction of tithe under the terms of an earlier parliamentary enclosure act. The files for these places usually contain only a copy of this act or a summary of its provisions concerning tithe commutation. In districts where tithe owners and tithe payers could not reach an agreement (category 2 files), tithe was commuted by an award drawn up by an assistant commissioner. Files for these places usually contain a draft of the award, a record of the commissioner's inquiries, minutes of evidence presented at meetings he may have attended to hear cases put by disputing parties and evidence of witnesses brought to him under oath. Sometimes tithe payers and tithe owners had been deadlocked in dispute for years, but often there was nothing more sinister than the fact that amounts of tithe remaining to be commuted were so small that there was little incentive to initiate the voluntary process. Generally speaking, the more complex problems were, the more likely it is that extensive records were generated. But assistant commissioners' interpretations of what they were expected to do prior to framing an award varied greatly as does the detail with which they set down their decision.

When tithe owners and tithe payers entered into a voluntary agreement for commutation (category 3 files) and decided to apportion rather than merge the rent-charge, the Tithe Commission instructed one of its local tithe agents or assistant commissioners to visit the district to write a report advising whether the agreement was fair to all parties and should be confirmed and then apportioned. From November 1837, local agents were issued with printed forms to help focus their inquiries and to standardise their answers. These reports contain descriptions of local landscapes and farming practices written by local tithe agents or assistant commissioners in support of their judgement of the fairness or otherwise of an agreed rent-charge. Their answers were written on one of only two types of form provided

by the Tithe Commission depending on its officers' perception of a county as one characterised by arable or pastoral farming (Fig. 2). Figures 3 and 4c indicate the difference in the breadth of information required by these two types of questionnaire forms, a fact which is reflected in the length and content of the answers, though, as with the compulsory awards, information provided does vary according to the predilections of individual local tithe agents and assistant commissioners (Holt, 1984). Assistant tithe commissioners and local agents who worked in England and Wales are listed in Table 1 which also specifies the total number of reports compiled by each man, the counties in which they worked, the number of reports for each county written by each man and the number completed in each year. In any one county, one agent reported on a clear majority of districts and, therefore, the value of the descriptive material can vary from one part of the country to another in line with the



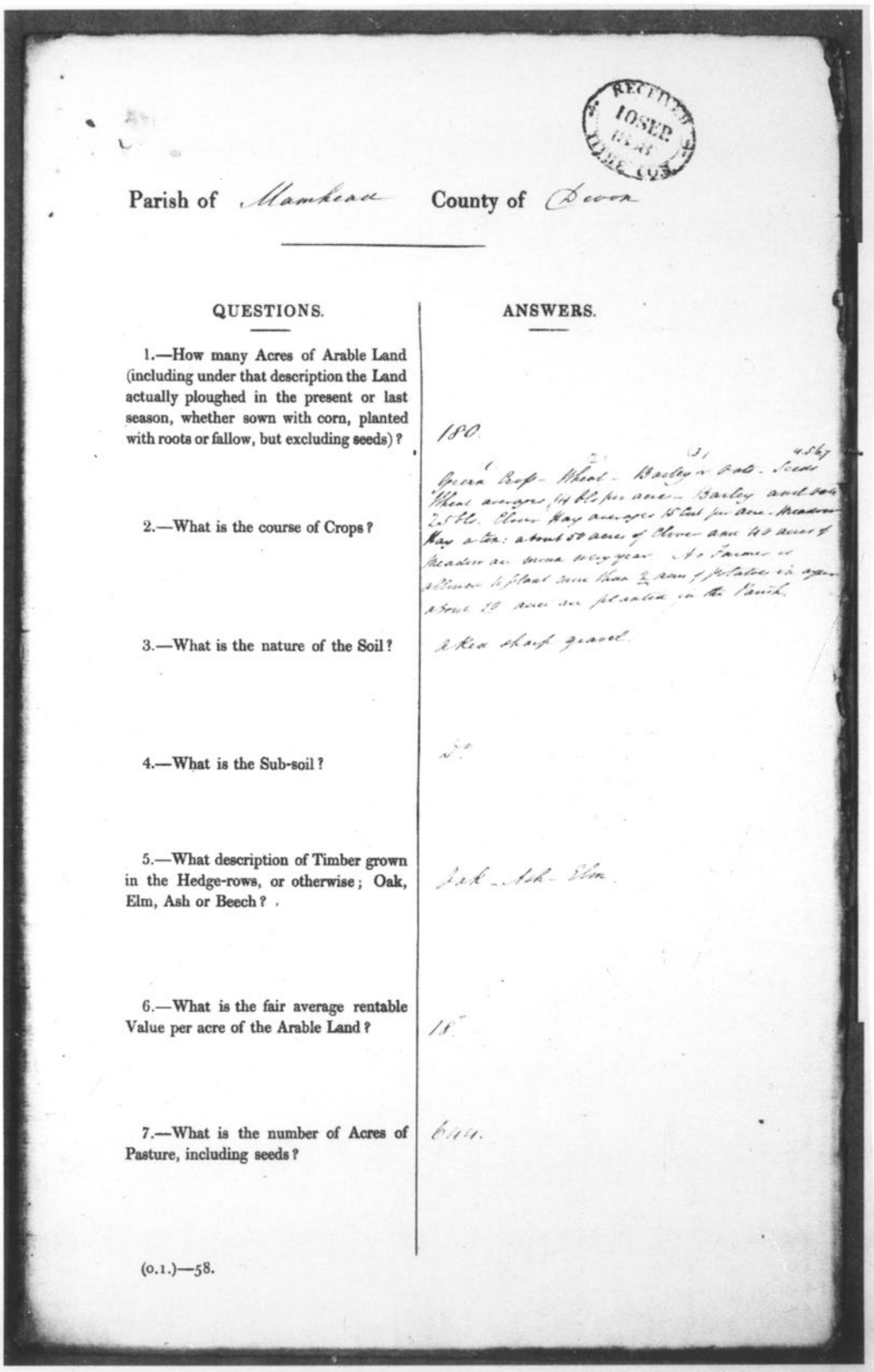
2 The tithe files of England and Wales



11. Describe the Parish, and the quality of the Lands, the system of Farming, and whether the quantity of produce has been affected by any extraordinary instances of high or low Farming?

Castle Camps is situated 12 miles from the Market town of Clare: 6 miles from Linton, and 8 miles from Saffron Walden, the principal market resorted to by the Farmers of Castle Camps. It is almost without the exception of a single field, a Heavy land Parish: there not being in the whole Parish fifty acres which do not require underdraining, both arable and pasture. In this the fields are well disposed. lying generally upon a moderate inclination. - The four-course system of husbandry prevails throughout the Parish, there being some trifling deviations thereupon, which a variation in seasons and the nature of the Lands render almost necessary. It is not what is called a Turnip land or upon which; which seasons, that according to the bulk of steam produced, the quantity of grain by no means corresponds. In many cases with a present period, oats have been sown instead of wheat: but now, this latter important grain is of the first consideration: and efforts are made to increase the breadth sown. Some few white turnips, (the all important Swede is not attempted,) with peas and Mangel Wurzel or mangold: but the chief preparation for barley is Summer fallowing. There is a full fourth crop of barley; and but one-eighth of beans or peas, and one-eighth of artificial grasses. These last are clover (red) sown in eight years, and trefoil with a mixture of Suckling or white clover the intermediate shifts. These crops are principally fed off with sheep. - The pasture lands are of good quality generally speaking, and are confided in for producing the crop of hay required for the Farmers' own consumption. - Wheat is not by any means a sheep soil, yet there are many very sheep kept, few or no cases: there is great difficulty in finding sheep with Spring food. of course in winter, a very few turnips, a pea upon the pastures and all the hay and straw they choose to eat will sustain sheep of this description. But ewes and lambs languish and do ill without plenty of green and succulent food. Spring is a season of much hardship and deprivation with sheep in soils like this: although in Summer and Autumn, and in mild winters up to Christmas they possess pasture advantages in soils of a different nature. Sheep are become of so much importance as many accounts to the Agriculturist, that no pains or expence seem to be spared to provide for their sustenance. - The Farming is altogether above an average of Cambridgeshire. It has been steady: with the instances of very high or very low Farming. —

3 'Description of the parish . . . ' from the report on the agreement for the commutation of tithes at Castle Camps, Cambridgeshire, 1840 ('arable' format)

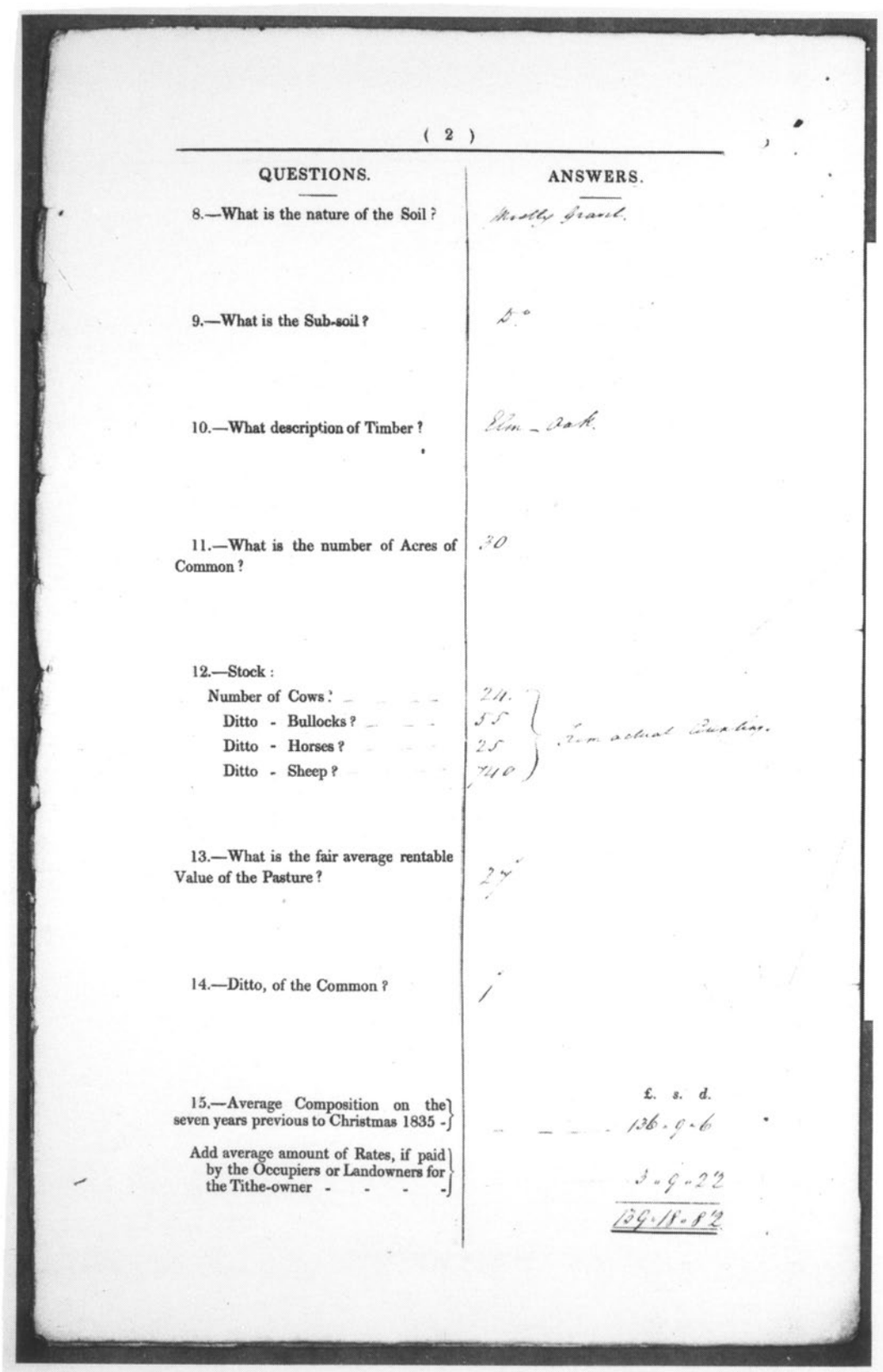


Parish of Mamhead County of Devon

QUESTIONS.	ANSWERS.
1.—How many Acres of Arable Land (including under that description the Land actually ploughed in the present or last season, whether sown with corn, planted with roots or fallow, but excluding seeds)?	180.
2.—What is the course of Crops?	Oats Rape Wheat Barley or Oats. Seeds Wheat averages 24 Bls per acre Barley and Oats 28 Bls. Clover Hay averages 15 Cwt per acre Meadow Hay ditto: about 50 acres of Clover and 40 acres of Meadow are mown every year. No Farmer cultivates less than 2 acres of Potatoes in a year about 50 acres are planted in the Parish.
3.—What is the nature of the Soil?	Red sharp gravel.
4.—What is the Sub-soil?	Do
5.—What description of Timber grown in the Hedge-rows, or otherwise; Oak, Elm, Ash or Beech?	Oak Ash Elm.
6.—What is the fair average rentable Value per acre of the Arable Land?	18/
7.—What is the number of Acres of Pasture, including seeds?	6000.

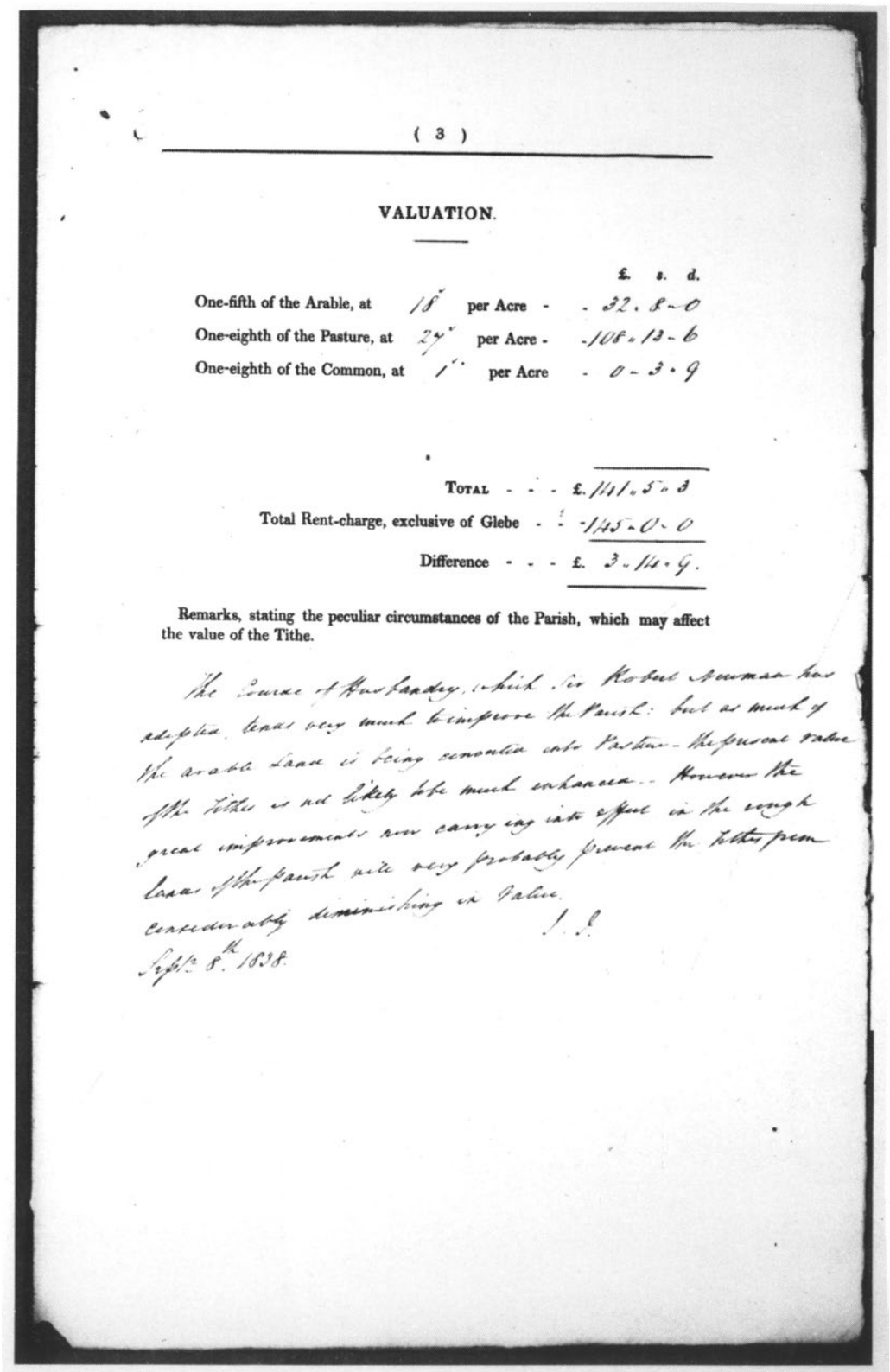
(0.1.)—58.

4a, 4b and 4c Report on the agreement for the commutation of tithes at Mamhead, Devon, 1838 ('pastoral' format)



(2)

QUESTIONS.	ANSWERS.
8.—What is the nature of the Soil?	Mostly Gravel.
9.—What is the Sub-soil?	Do.
10.—What description of Timber?	Elm - Oak.
11.—What is the number of Acres of Common?	30
12.—Stock:	
Number of Cows?	24.
Ditto - Bullocks?	55
Ditto - Horses?	25
Ditto - Sheep?	740
	From actual Enumeration.
13.—What is the fair average rentable Value of the Pasture?	27
14.—Ditto, of the Common?	1
15.—Average Composition on the seven years previous to Christmas 1835 -	£. s. d. 136 - 9 - 6
Add average amount of Rates, if paid by the Occupiers or Landowners for the Tithe-owner - - - -	3 - 9 - 22
	139 - 18 - 82



(3)

VALUATION.

			£.	s.	d.
One-fifth of the Arable, at	18/	per Acre -	32.	8.	0
One-eighth of the Pasture, at	24/	per Acre -	106.	13.	6
One-eighth of the Common, at	1/	per Acre	0.	3.	9
TOTAL - - -			£. 141.	5.	3
Total Rent-charge, exclusive of Glebe -			145.	0.	0
Difference - - -			£. 3.	14.	9.

Remarks, stating the peculiar circumstances of the Parish, which may affect the value of the Tithe.

The Course of Husbandry, which Sir Robert Newman has adopted, tends very much to improve the Parish: but as much of the arable Land is being converted into Pasture - the present value of the Tithes is not likely to be much enhanced. Moreover the great improvements now carrying into effect in the rough Land of the Parish will very probably prevent the Tithes from considerably diminishing in Value.

J. J.

Sept.r 8.th 1838.