

13 British farming between the wars

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THE interwar years are remembered, in the agricultural community, as a time of hardship and depression. When I first went to work on farms, in the early 1960s, many of the farmers who employed me had been farming thirty years earlier, and they spoke of low prices and incomes, decreasing arable and increasing pasture, fewer crops and more livestock: 'dog and stick farming' was the phrase used, because those were the main tools required to look after extensively grazed animals. Their stories were confirmed later when I began to read the writers of the period. Adrian Bell's *Silver Ley* (1931) ended with a description of a great farmers' protest meeting at Cambridge; the final part of A. G. Street's classic *Farmer's Glory* (1932), referring to the 1920s, was entitled 'The Waning of the Glory', and John Moore, in *Portrait of Elmbury* (1945), described the impact of agricultural depression on Tewkesbury between 1924 and 1927.¹ Le Gros Clark and Titmuss, writing a polemical Penguin Special early in 1939, asked, 'Can our home farming stand the strain of a protracted war? We might reply by asking how far our home farming can stand the strain of peace.'² Harkness argued that the 1920s and 30s saw a continuation of the *laissez-faire* policies of the years between 1870 and 1914.³ By the beginning of the Second World War a widely accepted narrative of the previous two decades was already established.

The post-war historians soon began to tell the same tale: 'the land was unchanging, but its fortunes declining', in the words of C. L. Mowat, one of the first of them, and 'agriculture was left to its fate' according to Alan Armstrong, one of the more recent.⁴ Others largely agreed with them.⁵ Yet, as Joan

¹ A. Bell, *Silver Ley* (1931); A. G. Street, *Farmer's Glory* (1932); J. Moore, *Portrait of Elmbury* (1945), pp. 72–3.

² F. Le G. Clark and R. Titmuss, *Our Food Problem: A Study of National Security* (1939), p. 49.

³ D. A. E. Harkness, *War and British Agriculture* (1941), p. 28.

⁴ C. L. Mowat, *Britain between the Wars, 1918–1940* (1955), p. 250; W. A. Armstrong, 'The countryside', in *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750–1950*, vol. 1: *Regions and Communities*, ed. F. M. L. Thompson (1990), pp. 134–5.

⁵ K. A. H. Murray, *Agriculture, History of the Second World War*, Civil Series (1955), chapter 2; E. H. Whetham, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, vol. 8: 1914–1939 (Cambridge, 1978); J. S. Creasey and S. B. Ward, *The Countryside*

Thirsk has pointed out, the fact that farming had to change did not mean that it was inevitably unprofitable, and there were several examples of farmers who found successful responses to new circumstances.⁶ The interwar period was a time when agricultural science and education were expanding, albeit from small beginnings, and productivity was growing. The volume of output rose. Why, then, was the image of depression so powerful, and to what extent was it justified? Those are the questions with which this chapter is largely concerned, but in order to make sense of them it is first necessary to sketch in the international and policy context within which British agriculture operated.

THE WORLD MARKET AND UK AGRICULTURAL POLICY

Between the wars the United Kingdom was an import economy as far as food and agriculture were concerned. On average, between 1920 and 1939, food, beverages and tobacco formed 45 per cent of UK imports. In 1937–8 imports accounted for 76 per cent of the wheat supply, 60 per cent of the barley supply, 81 per cent of the sugar supply, and significant proportions of fruit and vegetable supplies. The pattern was the same in meat and animal products: 50 per cent of beef, 62 per cent of mutton, 53 per cent of pigmeat, 21 per cent of poultry meat, 91 per cent of butter, 76 per cent of cheese, 39 per cent of eggs and 88 per cent of wool supplies were imported. Food imports as a whole accounted for about one-third of all UK imports (compared with industrial raw materials, which accounted for 22 per cent).⁷ Once government support was withdrawn, in 1921, developments on world markets had a direct effect on the prices received by UK farmers. Interestingly, the more recent examinations of this period have very little to say about the world market, and Michael Tracy's work, which gave it the prominence it deserved, seems to have been forgotten recently.⁸ There is no space in this chapter to tell the whole story, and two illustrations will have to suffice. The first concerns the wheat trade: world wheat production, inflated by the demand increases of the First World

between the Wars, 1918–1940 (1984); J. Brown, *Agriculture in England: A Survey of Farming, 1870–1947* (Manchester, 1987); R. Perren, *Agriculture in depression, 1870–1940* (Cambridge, 1995); A. Howkins, *The Death of Rural England: A Social History of the Countryside since 1900* (2003).

⁶ J. Thirsk, *Alternative Agriculture: A History from the Black Death to the Present Day* (Oxford, 1997).

⁷ T. Leisner, *One Hundred Years of Economic Statistics* (1989), p. 46; D. Britton and H. F. Marks, *A Hundred Years of British Food and Farming: A Statistical Survey* (1989), pp. 166–242; A. F. Wilt, *Food for War: Agriculture and Rearmament in Britain before the Second World War* (Oxford, 2001), p. 86.

⁸ M. Tracy, *Agriculture in Western Europe*, 2nd edn (1982).

War, was already declining by 1920. Nonetheless, although the net surplus of supplies only amounted to about 7 per cent of production, that was slightly more than the import requirement of the largest importer, the UK.⁹ Here was a sign of structural surplus. The effects of that, and of the impact of more general depression, were seen in the USA ten years later. Maize and wheat prices in 1931 fell to half of their 1929 levels. One-quarter of the US population lived on farms, and their incomes fell with these price falls. By 1930 54 per cent of farm families – some 17 million people – earned less than \$1,000 per annum. The poverty line at that time was set at \$2,000 per annum.¹⁰ Similar problems affected many other countries.¹¹ Agricultural depression was a world-wide phenomenon. In Britain average wheat prices fell from 17s 0d per hundredweight in 1919 to 9s 10d in 1929. Barley prices fell from 21s 2d to 9s 11d per hundredweight over the same period, and prices of oats similarly decreased. Fat cattle prices nearly halved, as did fat sheep prices, and fat pig prices more than halved between 1920 and 1929.¹² The overall agricultural price index (API) for the UK fell from a peak of 16.33 in 1920 to a minimum of 6.27 in 1933 (1986 = 100). It subsequently rose again, but had only reached 7.38 by 1939. Part of this was the result of inflation and disinflation – the deflated API only fell from 235 to 144 in the same period – but the trend was clear.¹³

Depression, or at least low prices, were by no means unpredicted. In 1916 Sir Daniel Hall had pointed out that increasing the arable area in the UK would require some form of protection, and by 1919 it was clear that government support would at least be controversial, if it continued at all.¹⁴ The Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the economic prospects of the agricultural industry was evenly split, half recommending continued price support and the other half its cessation. The latter group identified the potential danger of reliance on support: agriculture would be ‘obliged to conduct its operations on the uncertain basis provided by guaranteed prices. These guarantees can

⁹ C. Kains-Jackson, ‘The corn trade in 1919’, *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* [hereafter *JRASE*] 80 (1919): 212–24.

¹⁰ D. Reynolds, *Rich Relations: The American occupation of Britain, 1942–45* (1995), p. 28.

¹¹ See, for example, the memories of farming in New Zealand and Argentina in this period in J. Cherrington, *On the Smell of an Oily Rag: My 50 Years in Farming* (1979), pp. 33, 44.

¹² R. E. Stanley, ‘Agricultural statistics 1929’, *JRASE* 90 (1929): 219–21.

¹³ P. Brassley, ‘Output and technical change in twentieth-century British agriculture’, *Agricultural History Review* 48 (2000): 60–84.

¹⁴ A. D. Hall, *Agriculture after the War* (1916), p. 128.

only be given by Act of Parliament, and no Parliament can bind its successors. Political opposition to guaranteed prices is certain.¹⁵

In 1921 support was discontinued, and by 1922 Charles Orwin, head of the Agricultural Economics Research Institute at Oxford, was predicting the impact of lower prices: '... there is plenty of room for a further fall in markets before farming of one kind or another ceases to be a remunerative investment, but the country should be perfectly clear as to what is involved. The remedy for low prices is the reduction of costs and of output.' The same thing had happened thirty years earlier, he argued. In one of the southern counties, in a hamlet which once sent forty-four children to the village school, a farmer, a shepherd and a dog, all living elsewhere, eventually farmed the land by themselves, 'and today there can be seen a deserted village [he provided photographs to prove it] ... all within seventy miles of London, the centre of a state which imports more food per head of population than any in the civilised world.'¹⁶

The political pressures to change the trend were resisted. Bonar Law, the Conservative Prime Minister, told a deputation of farmers and farm workers in March 1923 that 'agriculture must lie on an economic basis'.¹⁷ Both governments and consumers retained fond memories of the years of stability, free trade, and peace before 1914. It was probably, in the retrospective view of a near-contemporary, one of the factors behind the decision to return to the Gold Standard in 1925.¹⁸ A few months later the Baldwin government, with Walter Guinness as Minister of Agriculture, produced the 1926 White Paper on agricultural policy, which again rejected the idea of agricultural protection or subsidy.¹⁹ It was widely agreed, declared the White Paper, that agricultural policy should aim to maximise food output and provide a reasonable livelihood for the greatest number of people, but there was no agreement on how to achieve these aims. They might be brought about by increasing the corn acreage, but that could not be done without import controls or subsidies, neither of which the government would contemplate. The British farmer would be better advised 'to aim at meeting the demands of the population for meat and

¹⁵ Royal Commission on Agriculture, 1919, *The Interim Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Economic Prospects of the Agricultural Industry in Great Britain*. Cmd. 473, 1919, BPP 1919, viii. 1.

¹⁶ C. S. Orwin, 'Commodity prices and farming policy', *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 83 (1922): 9–10.

¹⁷ Howkins, *The Death of Rural England*, p. 50.

¹⁸ Harkness, *War and British Agriculture*, pp. 31–2.

¹⁹ *Agricultural Policy*, Cmd. 2581 (1926).

milk'.²⁰ The policy proposed, therefore, was one of education and encouragement rather than coercion, to stimulate private enterprise and to protect farmers from 'the dislocation of reversals of policy'.²¹ Free trade, in other words. But there were to be several measures aimed at improving agricultural efficiency, such as the provision of credit, drainage schemes, co-operative schemes, money for agricultural research and advisory schemes, support for the expanding sugar beet industry, and improvement of unclassified roads. All these, the White Paper argued, would increase confidence in the agricultural industry, and be 'far more effective than any alternative policies of a drastic and revolutionary character ...'²²

The drastic change in policy began in 1931. The Conservative-dominated National Government that took office in August of that year could see some advantages in protectionism, although since industrial workers might spend up to 40 per cent of their total expenditure on food, it was also aware of the importance of cheap food.²³ It established tariffs on manufactured goods, but not upon major foodstuffs and raw materials. The question of how imports from the Empire should be treated then arose. At the Ottawa Conference in 1932 the UK agreed a series of preferential arrangements with Dominion countries whereby Empire produce would be largely exempt from the duties that were to be imposed on wheat, butter, cheese and sugar.²⁴ Since Canada provided 39 per cent of food imports to Britain, and Australia 24 per cent, assistance afforded to UK farmers by the move to protectionism was not great.²⁵ More significant was a variety of domestic policy initiatives: the 1932 Wheat Act, the establishment of the various marketing boards from 1933 onwards, the beef cattle subsidy of 1934, and the continuation of the sugar beet subsidy.²⁶ The 1937 Agriculture Act, with half an eye to increasing food production in the event of an emergency, introduced price subsidies for oats and barley and subsidies to reduce the cost of lime and basic slag (a phosphatic fertiliser).²⁷ A little earlier, in November 1936, the Food (Defence Plans) Department of the Board of Trade had been established. It would form the nucleus of a Ministry

²⁰ *Agricultural Policy*, clause 5.

²¹ *Agricultural Policy*, clause 8.

²² *Agricultural Policy*, clause 20.

²³ Harkness, *War and British Agriculture*, p. 41.

²⁴ Tracy, *Agriculture in Western Europe*, pp. 161–2. A detailed account of the negotiations on and effects of the Ottawa conference is given in T. Rooth, 'Trade agreements and the evolution of British agricultural policy in the 1930s', *Agricultural History Review* 33 (1985): 173–90.

²⁵ Wilt, *Food for War*, p. 87.

²⁶ Tracy, *Agriculture in Western Europe*, pp. 162–4.

²⁷ Whetham, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, vol. 8, p. 261.

of Food in the event of war, and it was a further sign of one of the major influences on agricultural policy at the end of the 1930s.²⁸ Nevertheless, in March 1939 Le Gros Clark and Titmuss thought it worth while to publish their Penguin Special warning of the dangers of famine in wartime.²⁹

THE RESPONSE TO MARKETS AND POLICY

The foregoing discussion reveals the differences between the two interwar decades: to put it crudely, farming was left to its own devices in the 1920s and increasingly assisted in the 1930s. The effects of this could be seen in the changing prices received by farmers, although it should be remembered that the general level of retail prices (i.e. those measured by the Retail Price Index – the RPI) varied at the same time. Having been fairly stable in the first decade of the twentieth century, general retail prices began to rise from about 1909 and then doubled in the First World War, reaching a peak in 1920 before decreasing steadily in the 1920s and early 1930s. They bottomed out in 1933/4, but the 1940 price level was still below that of 1918. Agricultural prices as a whole (i.e. those measured by the agricultural price index – the API) followed the same trajectory, with a peak in 1919–20, a rapid decrease from 1920–2, and a fairly steady decline to 1933, after which they began to rise.³⁰ Between 1918 and 1939, after taking account of variations in the value of money (i.e. deflating the API by the RPI), there were twice as many years in which agricultural prices fell as there were years in which they rose. (See table 1.)

TABLE 1 Real agricultural prices (API deflated by RPI, 1986 = 100)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Deflated API</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Deflated API</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Deflated API</i>
1918	237.1	1926	166.5	1934	145.4
1919	240.0	1927	162.4	1935	152.4
1920	235.3	1928	167.8	1936	152.5
1921	193.1	1929	164.4	1937	162.2
1922	173.3	1930	155.0	1938	158.4
1923	171.5	1931	149.9	1939	150.0
1924	176.8	1932	147.7	1940	187.2
1925	174.2	1933	144.5		

Source: see text

²⁸ Wilt, *Food for War*, p. 59.

²⁹ Clark and Titmuss, *Our Food Problem*.

³⁰ Brassley, 'Output and technical change in twentieth century British agriculture', pp. 80–4.

Price trends in Britain thus followed world agricultural price trends, as would be expected in what was, as we have already seen, an import-dominated agricultural economy.³¹ British farmers sold their output for less, and so had to sell more to maintain their receipts. A basket of farm goods that would have been sold for £240 (in 1986 prices) in 1919 would have realised only £144.5 (also in 1986 prices) in 1933. Thus the *volume* of output *rose* between 1920 and 1939 according to these calculations, and even rose a little – 10 per cent or so – between 1920 and 1934. (See table 2.)

TABLE 2 Volume of agricultural output

<i>Period</i>	<i>Agricultural output (£m, 1986 prices)</i>
1920-2	3,256.01
1923-9	3,335.07
1930-4	3,681.48
1935-9	4,133.72

Source: Brassley, 'Output and technical change ...', p. 84.

While this conclusion may be at variance with the popular conception of the interwar years, it does not seem implausible. Although the total area of agricultural land (i.e. arable plus permanent grass) decreased by about 2.7 million acres,³² or roughly 10 per cent, and the lower-priced arable products exhibited decreasing acreages and declining or at best static outputs, production of the higher-priced products increased, as table 3 demonstrates.

Sugar beet, with the advantage of government support, was the only arable crop to increase significantly, reaching a peak of over 400,000 acres and 4 million tones in 1934, before declining slightly to the levels shown in table 3. It is interesting to note that the wheat acreage and output increased in the later 1930s, after the crop had received government support, whereas the later introduction of support for barley was only just beginning to make itself felt by 1939. Oats, on the other hand, declined in importance, along with horses, their main consumers. Pig numbers increased fairly steadily, and poultry numbers also increased, peaking in the early 1930s.

Dairy cow numbers and milk sales were increasing even before the Milk Marketing Board was established, but some of the extra output went into the lower-priced manufacturing market. There were still over 1,300 farmhouse cheese-makers in 1934, although their numbers began to decline. The number of producer-retailers, in contrast, was rising, reaching more than

³¹ Tracy, *Agriculture in Western Europe*, p. 129.

³² Murray, *Agriculture*, p. 22.

TABLE 3 Changing acreages, numbers and outputs
in major UK agricultural products

<i>Product</i>	1920-2	1931	1938-9
<i>Declining or static</i>			
Wheat area (million acres)	2.0	1.25	1.7
Wheat output (million tons)	1.75	1.0	1.6
Barley area (million acres)	1.6	1.1	1.0
Barley output (million tons)	1.0	0.85	0.9
Oats area (million acres)	3.2	2.5	2.0
Oats output (million tons)	2.1	1.9	1.7
Potato area (million acres)	0.7	0.6	0.6
Potato output (million tons)	4.5	3.0	4.0
Horses (thousand)	950	784	650
<i>Expanding</i>			
Sugar beet area (thousand acres)	8	234	345
Sugar beet output (million tons)	0.07	1.7	3.5
Sheep (million)	20	25.6	26
Cattle and calves (million)	6.7	7.3	8.1
Cows and heifers in milk (million)	3.0	3.4	3.6
Pigs (million)	2.5	2.9	3.8
Pigmeat (thousand tons)	299		423
Fowls (million)	29	59.6	60
Eggs (million dozen)	189		545

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, *A Century of Agricultural Statistics* (1966), pp. 98-129; D. Britton and H. F. Marks, *A Hundred Years of British Food and Farming: a statistical survey* (1989), pp. 218 and 238.

63,000 by 1938.³³ Arthur Court's family in Wiltshire was among those that found selling liquid milk to the Board more profitable than cheese-making. Thus ended a family tradition of many years: 'I am not sure whether mother was glad about that or not ... at least she could go to the Women's Institute meetings and not have to rush to get her cheese finished first.'³⁴ Liquid milk sales also began to supplant butter-making in South Devon, and in North Devon, traditionally a stock-rearing area, '... the erection of milk factories at Lifton, Torrington, Lapford ... and the establishment of the Milk Marketing Board, coupled with the fall in the price of store cattle, has led many farmers

³³ Whetham, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, vol. 8, pp. 252-4.

³⁴ A. Court, *Seedtime to Harvest: A Farmer's Life* (Bradford on Avon, 1987), p. 44.

to transfer their energies to milk production'.³⁵ A similar trend to dairying was seen in the East Midland areas and central Norfolk that formerly fed bullocks on a combination of grass and root crops: 'The root break released is devoted to cash crops such as potatoes, sugar beet, and carrots.'³⁶ The same pattern of decreased arable, more permanent pasture, and greater reliance on dairying was found in Wales.³⁷ On the Yorkshire Wolds, however, where farmers had formerly made a good living from malting barley and big, mutton-producing, root-fed sheep, there remained 'a baffling state of depression', since the traditional farming system was 'based almost entirely on markets for products which appear to be suffering a more or less permanent eclipse'.³⁸ Maxton's survey confirms that British agriculture retained enormous variations, and that some regions found it easier to adapt to market forces than others.

Similarly, some farmers embraced change more easily than others, and we know more about them as individuals than we know about those who failed. The *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, for example, ran a series on 'notable farming enterprises' in the 1930s in an attempt to dispel 'the false impression of the intelligence and ability of the average farmer in this country 'as a result of the period of depression which has weighed heavily upon the agricultural industry during the last ten years' (i.e. the 1920s).³⁹ The farming enterprises featured in the series, however, were hardly average. Sir Frederick Hiam, who farmed about 9,000 acres in the Fens, and George Baylis, with more than 12,000 acres near Newbury, operated two of the biggest farms in the country.⁴⁰ Messrs Parker and Proctor, who featured in a later article in the series, farmed 14,000 acres near King's Lynn, and, although the dairy farms of Mr Clyde Higgs near Stratford-upon-Avon extended to only 700 acres, they fed 350 Ayrshire cows supplying milk for five milk rounds in Stratford, Warwick and Leamington.⁴¹ In other words, the enterprises featured in the series were mostly large ones, with ready access to capital for the purchase of livestock, buildings and machinery. Nevertheless, the series overall made the valid point that blind adherence to traditional products or methods was not the way forward in terms of low prices. The Alley brothers, for example, reduced labour costs by adopting a simple rotation of two cereal crops followed by bare

³⁵ J. P. Maxton (ed.), *Regional Types of British Agriculture* (1936), p. 182.

³⁶ Maxton, *Regional Types*, pp. 101, 122.

³⁷ R. Moore-Colyer, *Farming in Depression; Wales, 1919-1939*, Welsh Institute of Rural Studies, Working Paper 6 (Aberystwyth, 1996), pp. 11, 26.

³⁸ Maxton, *Regional Types*, p. 83.

³⁹ H. G. Robinson, 'Notable farming enterprises: 1', *JRASE* 91 (1930): 20.

⁴⁰ Robinson, 'Notable farming enterprises: 1'.

⁴¹ F. Rayns, 'Two decades of light land farming', *JRASE* 95 (1934): 117-35; J. A. Scott Watson, 'Mr Clyde Higgs' dairy farms', *JRASE* 97 (1936): 112-23.

fallow on a heavily mechanised farm near Fakenham in Norfolk.⁴² In contrast, Mr A. H. Brown, on a dairy and corn farm in Hampshire, increased the intensity of production by his heavy use of fertilisers and purchased feedingstuffs. Similarly, George Henderson, who had only about a hundred acres of light land on the Cotswolds from the 1920s, was convinced that ‘the solution must be intensity of production’.⁴³ The most prominent interwar farmers, however, such as the Hosier bothers, pioneered extensive dairy farming on light land, using moveable milking sheds known as ‘bails’. By the end of the 1930s there were about 200 farms using this system in Wiltshire and the neighbouring counties.⁴⁴

Further evidence of technical change might be found in the papers read to the Farmers’ Club, a long-established group of the more prominent and financially stable members of the industry. In 1921, for example, they heard about scientific pig-breeding, in 1922 about milk recording. In 1927 Mr Hosier told them about his open-air dairying system, and in 1932 they had papers on recent developments in the early potato industry, fruit and vegetables and their production for canning, and the organisation and expansion of the pig industry. In 1934 Sir William Ray MP spoke about the application of electricity to agriculture, and Mr Boutflour, a prominent advisor, educator, and advocate of the use of concentrate feeds for milk production, spoke about dairy cattle.⁴⁵ Some farmers, at least, were reacting logically, if not always rapidly, to market forces, and falling cereal outputs did not imply a decreasing total volume of agricultural output.

COST CHANGES

What also mattered to farmers was how much money they made. If costs rose by more than output their incomes would fall, and vice versa, and the next step therefore is to examine cost trends, the calculation of which is not without its complexities. Some costs are relatively simple to evaluate; spending on feeds, fertilisers, seeds, and so on. Others, such as labour, are simple at first sight – they obviously include the wages paid to employed workers – but potentially more complex, for farmers and their families also perform some of

⁴² H. G. Robinson, ‘Messrs S. E. and J. F. Alley’s mechanized farming’, *JRASE* 93 (1932): 157–65.

⁴³ H. G. Robinson, ‘Mr A. H. Brown’s farms’, *JRASE* 92 (1931): 151–62; G. Henderson, *The Farming Ladder* (1944), p. 18.

⁴⁴ D. Taylor, ‘Hosier, Arthur Julius (1877–1963)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).

⁴⁵ K. Fitzgerald, *Ahead of their Time: A Short History of the Farmers’ Club* (1968), pp. 247–54.

the manual work on the farm, although they may not always be paid. Other costs, such as depreciation, can also present problems. In practice, therefore, cost calculations rely on the use of conventions to produce comparisons of like with like. For comparisons over time in this period there are further problems, first because the removal of the new state of Eire from the UK figures in 1922 produces difficulties in making comparisons with earlier years, and second because the value of money changed over time. The costs shown in table 4 include input costs, such as feed, fertilisers, etc., depreciation, and factor costs, meaning those for labour, net rent, and interest.⁴⁶

TABLE 4 Total costs in current prices in UK agriculture, 1904–39

<i>Period</i>	<i>Cost (£ million)</i>
1904–10	146.32
1911–13	157.20
1920–3	274.94
1924–9	247.24
1930–4	211.94
1935–9	233.07

Source: Brassley, 'Agricultural output, costs, incomes and productivity'

Subtracting these figures from the figures for output, also expressed in current prices, produces values for the net farm income in the period, but in order to make valid comparisons over time these need to be adjusted by the retail price index. This is done in table 5, with the resulting net farm income in constant price terms also being expressed as an index. The principal conclusion to be derived from table 5 is that, in money terms, costs did not fall as much as output when farm prices fell in the 1920s. Expenditure on inputs such as fertilisers, feeds and seeds varied little once changes in the value of money were taken into account, and, although wages rates increased up to the late 1920s, the number of workers employed was falling, so the overall wage bill varied little.⁴⁷ The overall result, therefore, was that farmers were residual earners: they did well when prices were high and badly in the years of world surpluses when they fell. Net farm income in real terms (i.e. constant

⁴⁶ These problems have been discussed elsewhere, and therefore only the outlines of the argument are presented here. See P. Brassley, 'Agricultural output, costs, incomes and productivity in the UK, 1919–1940', in *Production et productivité agricoles dans le monde occidental (xiv–xx siècles)*, ed. J.-M. Chevet and G. Beaur (forthcoming).

⁴⁷ Harkness, *War and British Agriculture*, p. 37.

TABLE 5 UK net farm income (NFI), 1904–39

	<i>Output (col. A) (£ m)</i>	<i>Total costs (col. B) (£ m)</i>	<i>NFI (A – B) (£ m)</i>	<i>NFI (constant prices)*</i>	<i>Index of NFI in constant prices</i>
1904–10	170.55	146.32	24.23	939.1	100.0
1911–13	188.05	157.20	30.85	1,151.1	122.6
1920–23	409.35	274.94	134.41	2,150.6	229.0
1924–29	283.67	247.24	36.43	727.1	77.4
1930–34	245.47	211.94	33.53	746.8	79.5
1935–39	293.00	233.07	59.93	1,312.9	139.8

*The RPI used to convert the NFI to constant prices in this table is based on 1986 = 100, so the NFI in constant price terms is expressed in 1986 prices.

Source: Brassley, 'Agricultural output, costs, incomes and productivity'.

price terms) between 1920 and 1923 was on average more than double what it had been before the war, but was then cut by a factor of three for ten years. It rose again, significantly, between 1935 and 1939, but over the whole period the lean years far outnumbered the fat.⁴⁸ This might explain why farmers had bad memories of the interwar years. Those with traditional ideas about mixed farming and employing labour looked back to their grandfathers' stories of the years up to 1870, and remembered, like A. G. Street, the pre-First World War years of their youth, when the worst of the depression was past. Nevertheless, many of them responded to market forces and increased livestock output at the expense of arable, while cutting back on labour and economising on building and machinery repairs. They produced as much as ever, or more in volume terms, but not in traditional combinations. As a result, despite the downturn in prices and the fall in incomes, the agricultural industry's use of the nation's land, labour and capital resources was not necessarily wasteful or inefficient. Whether those involved enjoyed this new kind of farming is another matter. Street, writing in July 1931, was clearly proud of having changed his farming system so that his business survived, but he gives the clear impression that, for him, there was more comfort and pleasure in the sort of farming to which he had been brought up before the war.⁴⁹

The interwar years were, for the farming industry, a mixture of decline and regeneration. There was increased emphasis on agricultural science, although how much was translated into practice is perhaps another matter. There were

⁴⁸ It is also worth noting that there could be significant differences between farms specialising in different enterprises: see Moore-Colyer, *Farming in Depression*, p. 25.

⁴⁹ Street, *Farmer's Glory*, pp. 229–68.

successful farmers introducing new techniques such as mechanisation and bail milking, and output, and perhaps even overall productivity, rose. But some farmers went bankrupt, workers left the land, farm incomes fluctuated a lot, and there was a feeling that dog and stick farming was not quite proper farming. There were some well-written books on country life, and their lament for traditional farming perhaps became equated with a wider lament for a lost rural innocence. The result was that the problems of traditional farming were emphasised over the successes of new systems and methods. The popularity of this farming literature, coupled with the increasing political effectiveness of the National Farmers' Union in highlighting agricultural problems, meant that the difficulties of the industry perhaps achieved a greater prominence in the image of the interwar countryside than they deserved.⁵⁰ Farming was only one part of the rural economy, but in this period it began to be seen as the dominant part, so its difficulties consequently affected the rural image as a whole.

⁵⁰ For the growing effectiveness of the NFU, see A. F. Cooper, *British Agricultural Policy, 1912–36: A Study in Conservative Politics* (Manchester, 1989).

I 5 The wheelwright, the carpenter, two ladies from Oxford, and the construction of socio-economic change in the countryside between the wars

Paul Brassley

DESPITE the title of this book, there is much to suggest that the common and traditional image of rural England between the wars is one of decline, of agriculture especially but also in rural crafts, trades, communities and culture. As one writer of the time put it, in a book almost inevitably titled *Gone Rustic*,

... I have wondered whether we have not lost something more valuable than a gold standard. For the blacksmith's race has gone forever from the earth ... there will be never again just this kind of tranquillity and honest worth. Generations, living simply, observing the seasons, self-reliant in work and pleasure, have bred the blacksmith's type. There will be a day when we shall try to revert to this type, but it will be in vain. The smithy will have changed to a garage on the village green, the lanes will all be straightened for motor-cars, the land cut up for speculative building, the old cottages renovated for week-enders. We cannot stay the hand of Time.¹

Thus, through contemporary publications, the image begins to emerge. The process is carried on by subsequent authors, reinforced or contradicted by the contemporary reactions to events of national and local policy-makers, and overlain by both the perception and the reality of what actually happened.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the construction of this image. In part, therefore, it considers the work of some of the authors of the time. It then refers briefly to the later work of rural sociologists and historians, before turning to the activities of the interwar rural policymakers. And finally it attempts to discover what was happening in one part of rural England – Devon – in the 1920s and 30s. And it does all of this with reference to rural crafts and

¹ C. Roberts, *Gone Rustic* (1934), p. 178.

trades other than agriculture, which have perhaps had less attention than they deserve in recent historiography.

THE LITERARY EVIDENCE

By the first decade of the twentieth century there were numerous books on the condition of rural England and the flight from the land, and this trend continued into the interwar years, with books such as *Farmer's Glory* and *Lark Rise*, which eventually achieved classic status.² The literary exploration of rural England was accompanied by a leisure exploration, by walkers, cyclists and, later, motorists, and the two were interrelated, in so far as the leisure activities helped to sell the books.³ As Alun Howkins points out, many of these books were about farming and farm workers, but some of them were concerned with rural crafts or trades, and it is these that will be discussed here.⁴

One of the most influential of the genre was Sturt's *The Wheelwright's Shop*, first published in 1923.⁵ It appears to be influential because it was picked out by Leavis and Thompson in their well-known *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness*, first published in 1933, in which they bemoan the disappearance of the 'organic community' and glorify Sturt and the world he portrays as the antithesis of all they oppose – mass production, standardisation, and levelling down – and the embodiment of all they support.⁶ It is easy to see why Sturt met with their approval. The whole book has a sepia-tinted elegiac quality, and he begins by explaining that in 1884, when he entered the business, it was a 'folk' industry with folk methods. His employees are described as friends of the family, custom, apprenticeship, and learning by tradition were important, and things were made to last. How different from the industrial world that Leavis and Thompson wished to attack. Towards the end of the book Sturt bemoans the importation of wheels from the USA and the introduction of a gas engine: it may have enabled the firm to survive, but it was 'the beginning of the end of the old style of business', and 'the men' became 'machine "hands"'. As such, their old relationship with their employer changed, and '... machinery has separated employers from employed and has robbed

² A. G. Street, *Farmer's Glory* (1932); F. Thompson, *Lark Rise* (Oxford, 1939).

³ B. C. Batsford, *The Britain of Brian Cook* (1987); C. Brace, 'A pleasure ground for noisy herds? Incompatible encounters with the Cotswolds and England, 1900–1950', *Rural History* 11 (2000): 75–94.

⁴ A. Howkins, 'The discovery of rural England', in *Englishness: Politics and Culture, 1880–1920*, ed. R. Colls and P. Dodd (1986).

⁵ G. Sturt, *The Wheelwright's Shop* (Cambridge, 1923).

⁶ F. R. Leavis and D. Thompson, *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* (1964), p. 87.

the latter of the sustaining delights which materials used to afford them'.⁷ It was just the sort of thing that would not happen in Leavis and Thompson's organic community, of course. In fact, as Raymond Williams pointed out, the story of the recently disappeared organic community is a long-lasting and powerful myth that can be traced back to the Garden of Eden.⁸ Moreover, Sturt saw himself as a writer first and a wheelwright second. Nevertheless, this is not to say that his book should be discounted. 'Myth' is a word with two meanings: it may be a fictionalised narrative, but it embodies a great truth, and the fact that *The Wheelwright's Shop* is still in print, by its original publisher, suggests that twentieth-century readers found something significant in it.

A year or so after the publication of *The Wheelwright's Shop*, the Institute of Agricultural Economics in Oxford produced a series of works on *Rural Industries in Britain*. The curious origins of this Oxford survey have been described in detail elsewhere.⁹ It began with a pilot study of the Oxford district, the results of which were published in 1921.¹⁰ The national survey, in four volumes, followed in 1926 and 1927. The first three of these were written by Helen Fitz-Randolph and M. Doriel Hay (the two ladies from Oxford), and the fourth, which dealt exclusively with Wales, was by Anna M. Jones, who was appointed in part at least for her ability to speak Welsh.¹¹ They had all carried out an extensive county-by-county survey of the whole country between 1921 and 1923, and described in great detail what they found. Its variety was enormous. In volume 1, which was mainly concerned with the wood-based industries, they mentioned coopers, turners, cloggers and tanners, makers of spelk baskets and trugs, fences, hurdles, besoms, hay rakes, barrel hoops and crate rods, as well as wheelwrights, blacksmiths, saddlers and makers of ropes, nets and halters. Volume 2 was almost entirely concerned with osiers and basket-making, and the rush, sedge, reed and straw industries. Volume 3 dealt mostly with the 'decorative' industries: spinning, weaving and dyeing, and lace-making, with additional material on rural potteries and an appendix on flint-knapping, an industry which sold its products to the flintlock trade, 'is already an anachronism', and produced 'consumption and other diseases of the throat and chest'

⁷ Sturt, *The Wheelwright's Shop*, pp. 200–2.

⁸ R. Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (1962). E. P. Thompson quotes Williams in his introduction to the 1993 edition of Sturt.

⁹ P. Brassley, 'Industries in the early twentieth-century countryside: the Oxford Rural Industries Survey of 1926/7', in *People, Landscape and Alternative Agriculture: Essays for Joan Thirsk*, ed. R. W. Hoyle (2004), pp. 133–48.

¹⁰ K. S. Woods, *Rural Industries round Oxford* (Oxford, 1921).

¹¹ H. FitzRandolph and M. D. Hay, *The Rural Industries of England and Wales*, vol. 1: *Timber and Underwood Industries and Some Village Workshops* (1926), vol. 2: *Osier Growing, Basketry, and Some Rural Factories* (1926), vol. 3: *Decorative Crafts and rural Potteries* (1927); A. M. Jones, *Rural Industries in Wales*.

among its workers. 'The supply of flint lock rifles to the natives of Africa [who must be armed so that they can shoot game but whom it is politic to arm less efficiently than the representatives of the ruling race] is hardly an end of sufficient importance to justify the continued employment of men in these unhealthy conditions.'¹² Volume 4 was concerned with the same range of industries as all the previous volumes, but dealt with Wales. In addition to describing the techniques of each craft or industry, they also examined earnings, costs, prices, marketing methods and foreign competition, and assessed the prospects of each. Rush-plaiters, for example, felt that the future of their trade was in doubt, whereas rush-cutters felt that their part of the trade was profitable and on the increase. This is perhaps why there is no overall conclusion to each volume, because what was important for one trade might be less so for another.

At this point, however, what is important is the difference in approach between FitzRandolph and Hay and writers such as Sturt. Whereas Sturt looked back nostalgically to his youth and mourned the passage of the old craft techniques, FitzRandolph and Hay were concerned with what their survey had found, which they described in great detail, and how the observed trends could be explained – it was a matter of industrial scale economies and decreasing transport costs, according to C. S. Orwin's preface.¹³ Sturt saw machinery as a threat, but for FitzRandolph and Hay it was an opportunity, and they wrote with approval of useful new machines such as the cross-cut, circular and band saws, lathes, and hand-morticing machines. They approved too of the diversification by wheelwrights into motor-body building; Sturt's shop moved in the same direction, and he saw it as a wise move 'from every point of view save the point of sentiment'.¹⁴ Orwin, less sentimentally, reminded his readers of 'the danger of these small unorganized enterprises becoming sweated industries', so that the survival or revival of a traditional craft might not always be desirable.¹⁵ Only at one point do the two approaches come near to touching: at the beginning of volume 1 of FitzRandolph and Hay is a 'Ballade of Rural Industries', which refers to industrialism as a 'cruel bereaver', and mentions 'Director of Survey, and each believer / In revival of village crafts like these' (my italics).¹⁶ Unsigned as they are, perhaps these verses reveal more

¹² FitzRandolph and Hay, *Rural Industries*, vol. 3, pp. 161, 165.

¹³ FitzRandolph and Hay, *Rural Industries*, vol. 3, p. vi.

¹⁴ FitzRandolph and Hay, *Rural Industries*, vol. 1, pp. 176, 178; Sturt, *The Wheelwright's Shop*, pp. 201.

¹⁵ FitzRandolph and Hay, *Rural Industries*, vol. 3, p. vi.

¹⁶ FitzRandolph and Hay, *Rural Industries*, vol. 1. The ballade was based on Dante Gabriel Rossetti's translation of Francois Villon's *The Ballade of Dead Ladies*, in D. G. Rossetti, *The Works*, ed. W. M. Rossetti (1911), p. 541.

about the personal feelings of the surveyors than all the measured, level, third-person prose in the rest of the volumes.

These two contrasting works have been examined in detail because they exemplify the contrasting genres in the interwar rural industries literature. FitzRandolph and Hay produced the pioneering socio-economic study, and Sturt was the prototype for the elegies. Both had their followers (albeit the latter much more than the former), and it is interesting to examine both ways of seeing the changing position of rural trades and crafts in this period.

One of the first followers (whether conscious or not) of Sturt was Gertrude Jekyll, who is now better known as a garden designer. Batsford published her *Old English Household Life: Some Account of Cottage Objects and Country Folk* in 1925.¹⁷ The cottage objects were arranged and described, with numerous photographs, chapter by chapter – fireplaces and hearths, candles, hearth implements, kitchen utensils, furniture – and then she branched out into cottage construction (in cruck, cob, wattle and daub, and stone), home industries (spinning and straw-plaiting), farm tools and implements, roadside gates and fences, bridges, and so on. ‘The old five-barred gate, made of thoroughly sound oak by a country carpenter who knows and practises the good traditions’ was described in minute detail, dimensions included, and produced a paragraph of praise for ‘the comeliness of a thing that is well made and is exactly fitted to its purpose.’¹⁸ She prefigured the Leavis and Thompson line in deprecating changes since the 1860s, referring to older, ‘and, in many respects, better ways’, and regretting the disappearance of ‘the strong, simple and beautiful furniture, for the most part of oak’. The change she attributed to ‘the increase in the use of steam machinery’ and the subdivision of work, ‘so that no one man has the satisfaction of seeing the labour of his hands completed and well done’, and she compared the England of the 1920s with what could be found ‘in the market place of a foreign town; ... crockery and simple clothing, wooden shoes and peasant tools, all coming straight from the producer’.¹⁹

More than a decade on from this, Walter Rose’s book *The Village Carpenter*, which was published by the Cambridge University Press (also Sturt’s publisher) in 1937, followed Sturt in describing the carpenter’s work in detail, from the initial sawing of his timber to the making of gates, fences, pumps, mills, the various parts of new houses, and coffins. It was, Rose admitted in his preface, more an account of how things had been in the 1890s and earlier than of a carpenter’s business in the 1930s, for after 1893 his family firm had

¹⁷ G. Jekyll, *Old English Household Life: Some Account of Cottage Objects and Country Folk* (1925). The book was reissued in 1933, and there was a new edition in 1975.

¹⁸ Jekyll, *Old English Household Life*, pp. 181–2.

¹⁹ Jekyll, *Old English Household Life*, pp. 3–4.

become general builders. 'Outside influences were also at work, slowly but surely breaking down the age-long prestige of each craft; their separate exclusiveness was disappearing.' (pp. xvii–xviii). But while burying him, he was also there to praise '... the craftsman, a carpenter whose work is the expression of his life, to whom anything short of good workmanship is a degradation to which he will not sink.'²⁰ The power of the book, however, derives not from remarks such as these, but from its detailed portrait of the carpenter's trade. It was left to Frank Kendon, who helped Rose to write the book and contributed an introduction, to emphasise the innocence of a manual craft, implicitly contrasted with the muck and brass of urban industry:

There is for half the world a deep-rooted association of domestic modesty, frugality and wholesomeness about a carpenter's shop ... clean-smelling work, the musical sound of his tools, his slow, kind, but masterly hands ... a child can watch a carpenter at work without risk of soiling; sawdust is cleaner than snow ...²¹

Rose himself might not have put it quite like that, but at the end of his book there is certainly the suggestion that the village remains the repository of important old skills which the town is in danger of losing.²² The same theme was picked up by Dorothy Hartley in *Made in England*, in which she describes and illustrates the tools and techniques for making a wide range of products from wood, straw, reed, stone, metal, pottery, leather and horn, and wool and feathers:

... I want everyone to appreciate the work done by country people. Not for its commercial value, but because the work is done by independent people, and the character of these few independent people is as strong as the goods they make ... Our large towns are no longer representative of this old English stock. The big commercial enterprises are mainly concerned with making money ... Mass production and specialization in themselves need not destroy vitality ... But the whole trend of factory industrialization today is towards a few clever minds directing well-drilled obedient masses ...²³

Again there is the distrust of money and commerce, and the disdain of the

²⁰ W. Rose, *The Village Carpenter* (Cambridge, 1937), pp. xvii–xviii, 74.

²¹ Rose, *The Village Carpenter*, p. xi.

²² Rose, *The Village Carpenter*, p. 139.

²³ D. Hartley, *Made in England*, 4th edn (1974), p. x.

urban masses; character and independence are valued, and they, apparently, are to be found in the countryside, making things to last.²⁴

A similar rejection of industrialism and adoption of a craft as a 'spiritually fulfilling way of life' is found in Bernard Leach's *A Potter's Book*.²⁵ 'In a machine age', he wrote, 'artist-craftsmen, working primarily with their hands, represent a natural reaction valid as individual expression, and they should be the source of creative design for mass-production whether they work in conjunction with industry or not.'²⁶ Leach, however, represents a different category, the artist-craftsman. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to follow the emergence of this group, and in any case it is unnecessary, for the story has been told vividly and in detail by Tanya Harrod. But a brief discussion of the difference between the artist-craftsman and the artisan-craftsman is worth while at this point. Harrod cheerfully admits that she avoids defining crafts, but begins by looking at interwar 'artist craftsmen' (a term which at the time was also applied to women) and their activities in ceramics, weaving, textile printing, bookbinding, calligraphy and furniture-making among others.²⁷ In other words, these are not the crafts discussed and enumerated elsewhere in this chapter – the thatchers, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, carpenters, cobblers, hurdle and basket-makers and so on, for whose activities Harrod uses the term 'vernacular crafts'. The difference is partly in the markets they aimed at and the techniques they used, and much to do with the social class of the craftsmen, but the distinction is not absolute. Blacksmiths could produce decorative wrought-ironwork, wood-turners and others furniture, and a range of different kinds of people could describe themselves as potters. But the artist-craftsmen identified themselves by their rejection of new techniques and mechanisation – the paradox, as Harrod remarks, was that '... an important part of being modern was to be anti-modern' – by their desire to reform and elevate contemporary life, by their emphasis on truth to materials, and their desire to rediscover old tools and materials.²⁸ Romney Green, for example, dated the degeneration in furniture

²⁴ Although they are a little later than the period with which this paper is concerned, it is worth noting that others wrote in a similar vein: 'As common crafts grow scarce and die out, it occurs vividly to some people, that here is something precious ...' (T. Hennell, *British Craftsmen* (1943), p. 7), and [it is a] 'disgrace to our social system that so fine a character as the country craftsman should have been allowed to disappear almost completely ...' (N. Wymer, *English Country Crafts: A Survey of their Development from Early Times to the Present Day* (1946), p. 4). See also F. Derrick, *Country Craftsmen* (1945), and H. L. Edlin, *Woodland Crafts in Britain* (1949).

²⁵ T. Harrod, *The Crafts in Britain in the 20th Century* (1999), p. 38.

²⁶ B. Leach, *A Potter's Book* (1940), p. 258.

²⁷ Harrod, *The Crafts in Britain*, pp. 9–10.

²⁸ Harrod, *The Crafts in Britain*, p. 145.

design back to the sixteenth century. The artist craftsmen often associated with marginal political groups such as Guild Socialism, Distributism, Social Credit (on the left), and other right-wing groups ‘... with novel, often anti-industrial, remedies for the seeming impasse of shrinking markets and rising unemployment’.²⁹ They were inspired by Eastern, African and South American art, and eastern philosophies, as well as local vernacular crafts. They often exploited the skills of artisans, but Harrod contends that ‘skill as such was not valued in the interwar craft world’, and that many of those who attained national reputations were not always personally skilful. They survived, she argues, partly because they made objects which looked like necessities but were marketed like luxuries, and partly because, like many of the better-known interwar artist craftsmen – Leach, Mairet, Peacock, Cardew – they ‘were able to step outside the economic framework and resist the commoditisation of the goods they had made’ because they had private means or patrons.³⁰ In many ways, therefore, the artist-craftsmen are irrelevant to the people and trades that form the main focus of this chapter; nevertheless, it is impossible to ignore them, if only because of the influence of the craft discourse on quangos such as the Rural Industries Bureau and on the construction of the craft image in the sort of books discussed earlier.

A reading of the interwar literature thus produces two different views of rural trades and crafts. In one, the traditional crafts are vanishing, save only for those which border on the arts, attract patronage, and appeal to the high-priced end of the market. In the other, the crafts are adapting, some faster and more successfully than others, to changing market conditions. Which is the more realistic picture?

HISTORIANS AND CONTEMPORARY COMMENTATORS

There are various ways of approaching the question posed at the end of the previous section. The most obvious is to examine the existing secondary literature, which, to generalise heroically, suggests that crafts were declining, although there were some efforts to prevent them from doing so.³¹

²⁹ Harrod, *The Crafts in Britain*, p. 145.

³⁰ Harrod, *The Crafts in Britain*, pp. 152, 168.

³¹ C. Bailey, ‘Making and meaning in the English countryside’, in *Technologies of Landscape: From Reaping to Recycling*, ed. D. E. Nye (1999); J. Chartres, ‘Rural industry and manufacturing’, in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, vol. 7: 1850–1914, ed. E. J. T. Collins (2000); J. Chartres and G. L. Turnbull, ‘Country craftsmen’, in *The Victorian Countryside*, ed. G. E. Mingay (1981); J. Saville, *Rural Depopulation in England and Wales, 1851–1951* (1957); W. M. Williams, *The Country Craftsman A Study of Some Rural Crafts and the Rural Industries Organisations in England* (Dartington, 1958).

Another source of information is the unpublished evidence of contemporary commentators. The first of these, in terms of chronology, was the Rural Industries Enquiry held by the Development Commission between December 1930 and February 1931.³² Following only four years after the Oxford Institute survey, it approached the question from a different standpoint. Although the Oxford Institute survey was, as pointed out above, put in train because the Development Commission and the Ministry of Agriculture wanted to know more about the state of the rural industries that they were about to support, it attempted to produce this information by detailed survey of the tradesmen on the ground. The 1930 survey, in contrast, although also apparently concerned with whether or not government money was being wisely spent, chose to take evidence from those in charge of the spending, especially the Rural Community Councils (RCCs) and the Rural Industries Bureau. It produced some interesting data on trends in rural industries, although it concentrated, not surprisingly, on those trades to which the RCCs gave most attention: blacksmiths, wheelwrights and saddlers, and to a lesser extent, basket-makers. The Cambridgeshire RCC reported no observable fall in the number of craftsmen over the previous five to six years, except perhaps for thatchers, although saddlers were finding it hard to find new work (folio 2). In Cheshire, however, a survey of 420 villages showed that, since 1910, blacksmiths had diminished in number by 40 per cent, saddlers by 60 per cent, wheelwrights by 15 per cent, basket-makers by 75 per cent, and coopers by 50 per cent (fo. 69). Blacksmiths in Dorset were still finding a good deal of agricultural work, but saddlers, except in hunting districts, 'present great difficulty' (fo. 18), and similarly in Hampshire their work was 'practically gone' in villages (fo. 26). In Somerset there was still considerable demand for hurdles, but 'willows have been very depressed' (fo. 52). A survey of craftsmen in Leicestershire found 160 smiths, eighty to ninety wheelwrights, and thirty to forty saddlers (fo. 39), and in Lindsey (part of Lincolnshire) there were 288 smiths, 380 wheelwrights and fifty-eight saddlers (fo. 44). The problems of smiths, saddlers and wheelwrights were generally attributed to the depressed state of agriculture, the increasing tendency of farmers to buy in towns, and the decreasing number of farm horses. In Hampshire it was reported that a farm which had used to keep twenty-five horses had reduced the number to nine in two years, and on another the number had fallen from ten to three in the same time (fo. 26). In Leicestershire village saddlers were also facing competition from the large number of ex-servicemen who had been trained in light leather-work.

In the face of these developments, some craftsmen were diversifying: in Lindsey, wheelwrights had managed to survive by doing the carpentry in

³² National Archives, Development Commission archives, Rural Industries Enquiry, D4/421.

council housing schemes or by making furniture, and saddlers could produce motor upholstery (fo. 44); some smiths had become motor repairers (classes in acetylene welding and motor repair work were held in Derbyshire (fo. 15)), and others had turned to decorative wrought-ironwork. In Kent a survey of 207 blacksmiths compared their situation in 1930 with that in 1924. Of the seventy-five who had turned to ornamental ironwork, only 21 per cent reported a decrease in business, whereas of the 132 who were not doing ornamental work, 69 per cent reported a drop in business (fo. 34). There was a demand for garden fencing in Sussex, and the hurdle-making competition at the county show was well supported (fo. 55). And not all the new developments developed as planned: at Tarvin in Cheshire a Dr Morton had established a communal workshop in an old barn, and 'as a result a dramatic group had been started' (fo. 69). Equally, not all craftsmen were enthusiastic about diversification. They were reluctant to invest in electricity, or oxy-acetylene welding plant, or circular saws because they were old, or they felt that there was insufficient work to repay the investment. Generally, smiths in Sussex were not taking up the motor business (fo. 55). In Monmouth it was simply reported that 'the wheelwrights had not got to the point of making furniture' (fo. 46).

The enquiry also heard from a Mr Dixon, the manager of Country Industries Ltd, a co-operative which had been established in the early 1920s to sell country craft work.³³ He made the point that craftsmen needed agents because selling, especially to big firms, took time, and he also argued that British craftworkers sometimes priced themselves out of their markets, citing the example of a laundry hamper nearly 50 per cent more expensive than its foreign equivalent, and differing from it only in ways which involved useless labour. Not surprisingly, perhaps, foreign basketwork imports were estimated to be worth about £500,000 per year.

The conclusions of this 1930 enquiry, perhaps surprisingly in the light of the evidence, were quite positive:

First, as to the present position and tendencies of the movement, looking back over nearly a decade of work. The original economist objection that to try and keep rural industries alive is like putting the hands of the clock back has been disproved; or if it has not been disproved, it has been shown that there is a large and lively group of people who do not believe it. Rural craftsmen have been unearthed, surveyed and catalogued: they have been agreeably surprised to find a sudden interest

³³ A. Rogers, *The Most Revolutionary Measure: A History of the Rural Development Commission, 1909–1999* (Salisbury, 1999), p. 44. I am most grateful to Alan Rogers for the gift of his book; National Archives, D4/421.

taken in them and have generally responded: the village saddler alone seems past repair ... (fo. 142)

However, they went on to admit that, for the trades ancillary to agriculture, the main problem was that agricultural work was 'steadily diminishing' because of the reduction in the arable area and the decreasing use of horses, which in turn produced a decrease in demand for farriery and harness-making and decreasing expenditure on repairs. Rural craftsmen, smiths especially, were unwilling to invest in electrification or oxy-acetylene welding plants because they were perceived to be unprofitable, and there was now a shortage of young smiths and wheelwrights because masters in financial difficulties were unwilling to take on apprentices (fos. 147–61). Nevertheless, they argued, the introduction of guilds and co-operatives, shows, propaganda, improvement of designs and the introduction of sidelines 'have all helped to rekindle the embers of a slowly dying fire' (fo. 142). In reality, the evidence produced by the enquiry might have led it to rather different conclusions. It demonstrated that the most active training demand was for 'classes connected with motors and welding', that rural businesses were most successful when they turned to new products such as fowl houses and garden fences, and that advice was most valued when it helped to increase sales: 'As the end of the craft worker is usually not Art for Art's sake, but the making of a living, the marketing of his goods is the end to be kept in view' (fo. 143). But the purpose of the enquiry was not to determine the commercial health of rural crafts and trades, but to decide whether or not the Development Commission should continue to fund Rural Community Councils when their existing funding from the Carnegie Trust ran out. Since the promotion of rural industries was by this time the activity for which the Commission was most widely known, even if most of its money still went to fund agricultural research, it is hardly surprising that its report chose, in the words of the popular song, to 'accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative'. And in this approach, it seems, it was probably supported by a powerful assemblage of government departments and other agencies. The Ministries of Pensions and Labour were interested in jobs for ex-servicemen at the end of the war, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries had support for rural industries written into its establishing Act in 1919.³⁴ Development Commission representatives had met civil servants and academics at the Welsh Office in 1919 to discuss the establishment and development of rural industries.³⁵ In the following decade the RIB (telegraphic address – indicatively? – 'Ruritania,

³⁴ Rogers, *The Most Revolutionary Measure*, pp. 44–5; Brassley, 'Industries in the early twentieth-century countryside'.

³⁵ National Archives, D4/419: 'Note of a conference held at the Welsh Office, 29 December 1919'.

Westcent, London'), the RCCs and the Oxford AERI were all using the money resulting from this interest. It would be surprising to find that such a combination of policy-makers would be easily thwarted, and, indeed, Rural Community Councils did continue to receive government funding through the 1930s.

In order to support their claims for central funding the RCCs had to submit very full reports of their activities, down to the day-to-day activities of the Rural Industries Organiser, and these form another useful and previously unexploited source for the period from 1936 onwards. The Somerset RCC report for 1936/7, for example, lists the number of 'useful craftsmen' in the county – mostly blacksmiths, wheelwrights, thatchers and hurdle-makers, but also four basket-makers, four furniture-makers and woodworkers, three weavers, two potters and one rake- and tool-handle-maker – and describes current conditions in various trades.³⁶ Blacksmiths were said to be profiting from an increase in work as a result of better agricultural conditions, and finding that they could not do without oxy-acetylene welding plant. In contrast, only six or seven wheelwrights out of the sixty-one in the county were making new carts, not all were finding repair work, and 'many smaller village wheelwrights have taken to general carpentering and house decorating to augment their ordinary repair work'. Declining horse numbers also produced 'a real problem' for saddlers. Most basket-makers worked for big firms – meaning those employing up to about forty workers – and the industry was flourishing (although the following year it was said to be 'in crisis' as a result of an increase in willow prices from £19 to £32 per ton), but there was little demand for thatchers. In 1937 the Somerset RCC extended its work to the neighbouring county of Dorset, and the report of a survey made there in January 1938 provides some interesting contrasts with Somerset.³⁷ Thatchers, for example, were found to be enjoying good business conditions, although there were few younger ones. Blacksmiths, on the other hand, were less well off. Many shops had closed in recent years through the effects of the depression or the lack of a successor or the loss of implement agencies. Although there could be an overwhelming demand for repairs in the grass-cutting season, only a few had oxy-acetylene plant, and some smiths had taken to plumbing in outlying areas where mains water supplies had recently been installed. There were only five apprentice blacksmiths and six apprentice wheelwrights in a county with over 100 smiths and sixty-one wheelwrights, joiners and other woodworkers. Most wheelwrights now made most of their income from jobbing building and carpentry, and 'now regard their original business as a sideline ... [although] when

³⁶ National Archives, D4/408, Somerset RCC report to the Treasury and Development Commission in support of claims for rural industries work.

³⁷ National Archives, D4/408.

wheels go the farmer has to resort to the wheelwright, though sometimes the axle is removed and replaced by one from an old car complete with wheels.'

The report from the Lincolnshire (Lindsey) RCC for 1936/7 produced some discussion at the National Council of Social Service, which had a supervisory role for RCCs, as to whether the Lindsey RCC was doing what it was supposed to do.³⁸ The secretary, a Major North Coates, was said to be mostly interested in education, and, indeed, there was much on education and training in the Lindsey report. Farriery courses and tests for the RSS (Registered Shoeing Smith) qualification had been arranged, horse-shoeing and oxy-acetylene welding classes had been held at the county show in 1934 and 1935, and there was a fifteen-week course in motor and electrical engineering for rural boys who were bused into Lincoln Technical College. In the following year this course was repeated, and attended by seventy students from nineteen parishes, of which twenty-nine were farmers and farm workers, nineteen were drivers of farm tractors, threshing-machine engineers, mechanics or van drivers, while the rest were schoolteachers, rural craftsmen, shopkeepers, or unemployed.

Thus the pattern which emerges from these reports is one of considerable variation from one county to another, but an overall impression of decline in traditional trades, with little investment in new methods – rural electrification was a hesitant process – few apprentices, and an ageing work-force. The Lindsey report for 1938/9 contained a survey of the ages of 320 smiths, joiners and wheelwrights, and saddlers.³⁹ None was under thirty years old, and 42 per cent of the smiths, 32 per cent of the woodworkers and 61 per cent of the saddlers were over sixty. Where there was enthusiasm for new methods and training, it was not in the traditional crafts but in the new technologies. Motor vehicles and tractors, it would seem, produced the same interest among the rural youth of the 1920s and 30s that computers do among the rural youth of the present day, and with much the same impression on the older generation.

Despite the protests of the Development Commission, there was something in what the economists said: it was difficult to counteract market forces. Where a real demand existed, crafts and trades would survive or flourish. Otherwise they would be in difficulties. And circumstances could change fairly quickly. In 1939, for example, the Director of the Rural Industries Bureau tried to set up a training scheme for wattle hurdle-makers, on the grounds that there was now a new demand for hurdles as foundations for oil storage tanks, for freight packing in cargo boats, windbreaks on South African fruit farms, and shooting butts. Since the folding of sheep on downland, the traditional

³⁸ National Archives, D4/400, Lincolnshire (Lindsey) RCC report to the Treasury and Development Commission in support of claims for rural industries work.

³⁹ National Archives, D4/400.

market for hurdles, had declined, there were few skilled workers left, and there was now a need to train new workers.⁴⁰ Bill (later Sir William) Slater drew on the Dartington experience in evidence to the Scott Committee in 1942, and came to the same conclusion about the importance of economics.⁴¹ He could speak with some authority, for the Dartington estate had been involved in promoting and thinking about a range of rural crafts and industries from the beginning of the Elmhursts' involvement with it. The banners installed in the Great Hall to cut down reverberation had been made over ten years by Elizabeth Peacock (1880–1969) to symbolise the various departments of the estate. Dartington Hall products included indoor and outdoor furniture, turned ware, pottery, cider and fruit juice and textiles. In the 1930s the trustees had been financing their own rural industries survey in Devon.⁴² 'There has been a very marked decline in the number of ancillary industries due to the mass production of the goods required for the farm', he said, so that smiths, wheelwrights and harness-makers were now mostly concerned with repairs, 'but with each advance in the mechanization of the farm their work becomes less'. Dartington's attempts to establish a variety of rural enterprises had convinced him that 'The rural craftsman must ... seek his market amongst the more discriminate members of the higher income section of the population', but even then there was the danger that '... the craftsman products ... will be copied by the factory and produced at a lower price. His markets are, therefore, continually being undermined.' The estate's 1937 catalogue shows eight wood turners working at the same bench, which suggests that it had already moved away from the idea of the individual craftsman producing his own or traditional designs.⁴³ This presumably reflected the importance that Slater attached to marketing. He cited Harris Tweed as a rural industry with an effective marketing organisation, and also emphasised the fact that 'the crofters weave only in their spare time': rural crafts were most likely to be successful as a supplementary industry to agriculture.

Therefore, interesting as it was, and influential as it may have been on the

⁴⁰ National Archives, D4/453, Rural Industries Bureau, Wattle Hurdle Making Scheme, 1939.

⁴¹ Dartington Hall Archives, High Cross House, Dartington, Devon. Box Ag Econ 3 (1926–85), file D: evidence for the Scott committee, 1942, by W. K. Slater.

⁴² This is confirmed in National Archives, D4/427, Correspondence between the Dartington Hall Trustees and the Development Commission on rural industries work in Devonshire, Jan and Feb 1940. For some time before February 1938 the trustees had been financing a rural industries survey in Devon by Mr Rex Gardner. It was to have been taken over by the newly formed Devon RCC, but the outbreak of war prevented this, and there were consequently misunderstandings over payments.

⁴³ Dartington Archives, 1937 catalogue of craft products.

up-market end of the craft industry, the Dartington experiment hardly provided a model which would keep the average blacksmith or wheelwright in the typical village. And to be fair to Slater, this is what he argued in his evidence to Scott, which contained far more about what constituted a suitable industry for a small rural town than about rural crafts *per se*. Thus the contemporary commentators produce the same conflicting impressions as the literary evidence discussed earlier: for some, it is the decline in traditional activities that dominates the picture; for others, it is the possibility of change and development that prevails. What counted, for the individual craftsman or tradesman in the village, was whether or not he was still in business and making a living. And the only way to see beneath the conflicts produced by the impressionistic evidence is to examine the trends in the numbers of rural craftsmen in this period.

THE QUANTITATIVE EVIDENCE

Unfortunately, it is easier to recognise the desirability of enumerating rural craftsmen than it is to count them. The best source for occupations is without doubt the Census Enumerator's book, which gives details of individuals, includes dual occupations such as 'blacksmith and publican', enables various age groups and genders to be separated, and allows precise location, all of which are desirable features in the statistics. But, given their hundred-year closure, these are useless for this period. They also require a lot of work to produce a national data sample. Consequently, previous investigators of rural employment have relied on the national summary data published from the census statistics. Chartres, especially, has made extensive use of these, with sophisticated data analysis to locate concentrations of specific trades.⁴⁴ For the purposes of this chapter, however, Chartres's methods are of little use, because they rely upon county figures, and each county contains both urban and rural areas. Wrigley tried to get round this problem by examining the difference between seventeen rural counties and the rest of England for ten trades over the years 1831–51.⁴⁵ It is possible to use his methodology for later years, up to 1911, but by 1931 definitions had changed to the point where it is not possible to produce comparative data. Moreover, although this method is more sophisticated than simply examining crude national totals, the rural counties still

⁴⁴ Chartres, 'Rural industry and manufacturing'; Chartres and Turnbull, 'Country craftsmen'.

⁴⁵ E. A. Wrigley, 'Men on the land and men in the countryside: employment in agriculture in early-nineteenth-century England', in *The World we have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure*, ed. L. Bonfield, R. M. Smith and K. Wrightson (Oxford, 1986).

contain significant urban areas. The only possible exception to this is the old county of Rutland, which contains one small market town – Oakham – but is otherwise reasonably rural. Saville used it in his work on rural depopulation, but only gives figures for 1911 and 1931.⁴⁶

The alternative sources of occupational data for this period, the directories, are by no means perfect. They tend to underestimate the numbers involved, by comparison with the census, and they do not always reveal dual occupations.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, for want of anything better they have been used by several investigators for various purposes. Chalklin examined agriculture and transport, food processing and retailing, building and miscellaneous trades in twenty-five parishes in Lincolnshire between 1896 and 1933, finding that the blacksmiths, wheelwrights and saddlers survived fairly well into the interwar period, although the tailors and shoemakers were disappearing.⁴⁸ Saville, for his work on rural depopulation, also examined eighteen parishes in the South Hams, demonstrating that the total of shoemakers, carpenters and builders, blacksmiths, masons, tailors, wheelwrights and thatchers almost halved between 1910 and 1939.⁴⁹ However, he was using only a small sample: by 1939 the total was only sixty-one workers. Despite the problems of the directories, therefore, they have been used by several workers to produce occupational data, and in several parts of the country, although none involve very large sample sizes. Although the best reason for continuing to use them is the lack of anything better, it is interesting to note that when the Somerset Rural Community Council expanded its work to Dorset in 1938, it too used *Kelly's Directory* to identify the new county's craftsmen.⁵⁰ If it was good enough for the bureaucrats at the time, we might argue, it should be good enough for the historians studying them.

The procedure adopted in the following study, therefore, was to attempt to overcome the problems discussed above (small samples, geographical limitations, and the inclusion of urban settlements) by identifying a large number – seventy-six – of parishes in Devon. These parishes had a maximum population of no more than about 1,000 in 1931, and were selected more or less

⁴⁶ J. Saville, *Rural Depopulation in England and Wales, 1851–1951* (1957), p. 74.

⁴⁷ C. A. Crompton, 'Changes in rural service occupations during the nineteenth century: an evaluation of two sources for Hertfordshire, England', *Rural History* 6/1 (1995): 193–204; E. Higgs, 'Occupational censuses and the agricultural workforce in Victorian England and Wales', *Economic History Review* 48/4 (1995): 700–16.

⁴⁸ C. W. Chalklin, 'The decline of the country craftsmen and tradesmen', in *The Vanishing Countryman*, ed. G. E. Mingay (1989).

⁴⁹ Saville, *Rural Depopulation*, p. 212.

⁵⁰ National Archives, D4/408, Somerset RCC report to the Treasury and Development Commission.

randomly, by drawing a line on the map, selecting the parishes which it cut, and eliminating those that contained too many people. Their total population in 1931 was 28,789. There were 289,926 people in the smaller towns (those with populations of less than 8,000) and villages of Devon in 1931, so the data collected from the directories represent a 10 per cent sample of the rural county, distributed across it from east to west and north to south (see Map 1).⁵¹ Directories for 1910, 1923 and 1939 were sampled, and the numbers of craftsmen and other occupations identified therein are shown in table 1.⁵²

TABLE 1 Numbers in rural crafts and trades in 76 parishes in Devon, 1910–39

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>1910</i>	<i>1923</i>	<i>1939</i>
Thatchers	18	9	6
Masons	42	24	10
Builders	13	12	23
Carpenters	73	48	49
Wheelwrights	31	26	14
Blacksmiths	76	61	49
Shoemakers	50	30	22
Tailors	37	26	19
(subtotal)	(340)	(236)	(192)
Farmers	1,670	1,733	1,961
Shopkeepers	101	108	147
Pubs, hotels etc.	105	91	87
B&Bs, tearooms etc.	22	27	64
Food processing	117	93	65
Garages	1	9	40
Others	142	146	183
(subtotal)	(498)	(474)	(586)

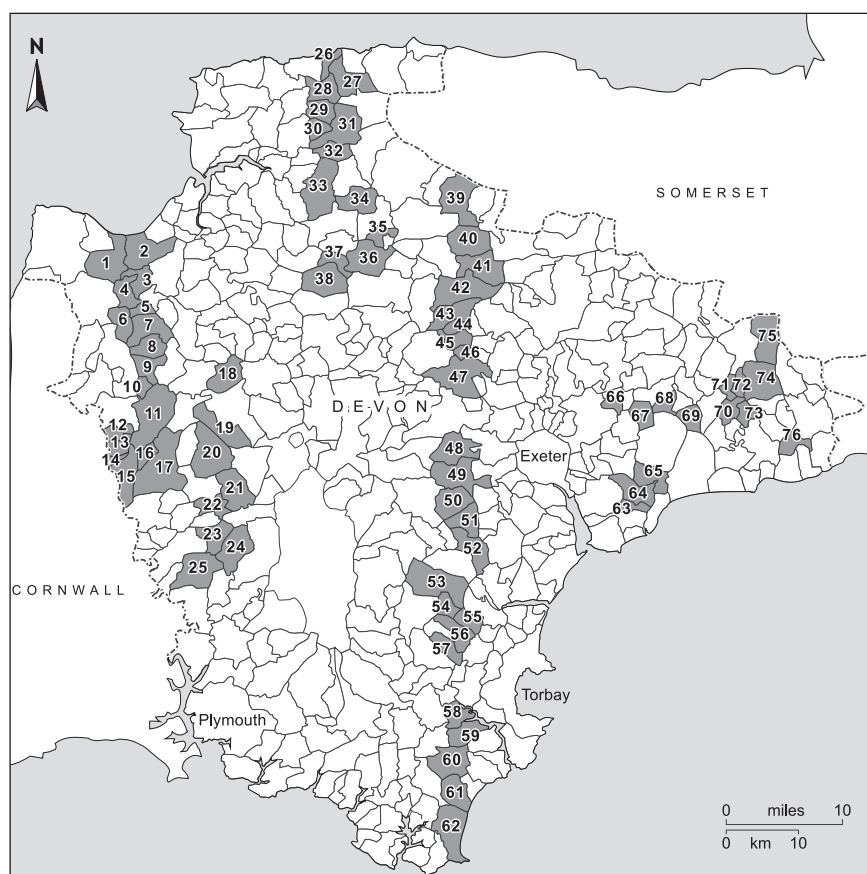
Source: see text

These figures reveal the same trends as those identified by Saville (1957) in his case-study of eighteen parishes in the South Hams, albeit to a lesser extent.⁵³ They are not directly comparable, because three of Saville's parishes

⁵¹ These figures are from the 1931 census, the results of which are reported in the 1939 directory.

⁵² *Kelly's Directories of Devon*, 1910, 1923, 1939. Each of these was sampled from microfiche copies held in the Westcountry Studies Library, Exeter.

⁵³ Saville, *Rural Depopulation*, p. 212. Although Saville states in his table xxxiii that he has used eighteen parishes, he actually lists nineteen (see p. 178).



- | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 Woolfardisworthy | 21 Bridestowe | 41 Rackenford | 61 Slapton |
| 2 Parkham | 22 Lewtrenchard | 42 Witheridge | 62 Stokenham |
| 3 East Putford | 23 Brentnor | 43 Thelbridge | 63 Bicton |
| 4 West Putford | 24 Mary Tavy | 44 Washford Pyne | 64 Colaton Raleigh |
| 5 Abbots Bickingham | 25 Lamerton | 45 Woolfardisworthy | 65 Newton Poppleford & Harpford |
| 6 Sutcombe | 26 Trentishoe | 46 Kennerleigh Bishop | 66 Clyst St Lawrence |
| 7 Milton Demerel | 27 Parracombe | 47 Sandford | 67 Talaton |
| 8 Thornbury | 28 Kentisbury | 48 Tedburn St Mary | 68 Feniton |
| 9 Cookbury | 29 Arlington | 49 Dunsford | 69 Gittisham |
| 10 Hollacombe | 30 Loxhore | 50 Bridford | 70 Offwell |
| 11 Ashwater | 31 Bratton Fleming | 51 Christow | 71 Monkton |
| 12 Tetcott | 32 Stoke Rivers | 52 Hennock | 72 Cotleigh |
| 13 Luffincott | 33 Swimbridge | 53 Ilsington | 73 Widworthy |
| 14 Northcott | 34 Filleigh | 54 Bickington | 74 Stockland |
| 15 St Giles on the Heath | 35 George Nympton | 55 Ogwell | 75 Yacombe |
| 16 Virginstowe | 36 King's Nympton | 56 Torbryan | 76 Musbury |
| 17 Broadwoodwidge | 37 Chittlehamholt | 57 Broadhempston | |
| 18 Highampton | 38 Burrington | 58 Ashprington | |
| 19 Beauworthy | 39 Molland | 59 Cornworthy | |
| 20 Bratton Clovelly | 40 Knowstone | 60 Blackawton | |

MAP 1 Parishes in the 10 per cent sample of rural Devon, 1910–39

–Totnes, Kingsbridge and Ivybridge – are small towns rather than villages, and so would have been eliminated from the sample discussed here. In Saville's sample the numbers engaged in the first eight trades in table 1 (thatchers to tailors) decreased by 48 per cent (118 to 61) between 1910 and 1939, with shoemakers and tailors being especially prone to disappear. In the all-Devon sample used here, the number of builders actually increases, although, given the similarities between the trades, it might be more realistic to add together figures for builders and masons and count them as a single trade. But the overall changes are not dissimilar to those found by Saville: a decrease of 43 per cent for the all-Devon sample, and of 42 per cent in fifteen parishes stretching north–south across south Devon from Tedburn St Mary to Stokenham. However, it is interesting to note that much of this change took place between 1910 and 1923: 104 tradesmen disappeared between 1910 and 1923, but only forty-four in the sixteen years between 1923 and 1939. So are the interwar years a period when rural crafts and trades had disappeared to such an extent that there were few left to lose, or are they a time in which the declining trend was bottoming out? Either explanation might have something to be said for it, but before deciding which is the most likely, it is interesting to examine the trends in the other part of table 1.

Saville provides no directory-derived evidence for other trades or occupations, but the information is available there, as can be seen from table 1. It is interesting to note that the number of farmers increases across the county, and this in a time of reputed agricultural depression. Although direct evidence is lacking, the most likely explanation is that this was a period of estate sales, so presumably not only did tenants take the opportunity to buy their farms, but also some of the bigger tenanted holdings, or perhaps home farms, were sold off to new entrants.

It is also interesting to see that numbers in the trades in the bottom half of the table, having declined slightly between 1910 and 1923, then increased in the next sixteen years. The trend was not uniform: the traditional forms of business in the hospitality industry – pubs and hotels – declined, as did the food-processing trades, which mean bakers, butchers and millers. In 1910 all but four parishes of the fourteen east Devon parishes sampled had food processors of some kind, but by 1939 eight parishes had none. Some of these businesses had probably been transformed into retailers rather than processors. Others clearly diversified their businesses. Even in 1910 a publican in Newton Poppleford acted as an agent for Gibbs' fertilizers, and in 1923 Albert Strawbridge of Colaton Raleigh was not only a shoeing and general smith but also an 'agent for the best kinds of agricultural implements, cycle repairs and accessories, and agent for leading makers'. At Gittisham in 1923 a carpenter also kept the post office. In other parts of the county there were similar examples

of multiple occupations. The keeper of the Artichoke Inn at Christow in 1910 was a saddler, the miller at Filleigh in 1923 was also a coal- and reed-merchant, and at the same time the blacksmith at West Putford was also a grocer and the registrar of births, marriages and deaths. Blacksmiths seemed especially likely to branch out. At Sandford in 1910 John Westcott described himself as an agricultural engineer, thrashing machine proprietor, smith and wagon-builder; the blacksmith at Beaworthy in 1939 was also an agricultural engineer and oxy-acetylene welder, while his colleague at Bratton Clovelly was also the county instructor in farriery.

The impact of the motor car may also be detected in the directories. As table 1 shows, was there an increase in the number of garages, with forty in the seventy-six parishes surveyed by 1939. Garage proprietors often combined their trade with other occupations, as in the garage and grocery at Bratton Fleming, the garage and haulage contractor at Burrington, and the garage, ironmonger, hardware, cycle and wireless dealer at Ashwater, all in 1939. Other trades, too, developed to cater for the motor car and its passengers: road contractors, for example, and new types of business in the hospitality trades, such as bed-and-breakfast establishments, those providing apartments and farmhouse accommodation, and tea shops, such as the Little Sigford Tea Orchard near the developing tourist destination of Haytor on Dartmoor. William A. Beckley of Sutcombe presumably began as a wheelwright, but by 1923 he claimed to be also a general carpenter and motor car and carriage-body builder.

The final expanding category was the inevitable 'others'. The range of trades included therein was predictably vast. Some have an air of tradition, as with the higglers, hawkers, rabbit-catchers, corn- and seed-merchants, cattle-dealers, cider-merchants, tanners and gamekeepers. Some, like the jewellers, builders' merchants, insurance agents and fishmongers, one is perhaps surprised to find in small villages. Others illustrate the penetration of the professionals into the countryside: not only the medical practitioners and district nurses, but also the vets, surveyors, sanitary inspectors and architects. Others are just rarities: the teazleman, the herbalist, the convent and the architectural wood-carver. There are also the primary and manufacturing industries, such as the edge-tool makers at Dunsford and Ogwell and the mines at Bridford, Christow, Hennock and Ilsington. And finally there are the signs of what in hindsight appear to be diversification or development in the rural economy: the road contractor, the motor car proprietor, cycle dealer, haulage contractor, beekeeper, basket-maker, horse-trainer, and dressmaker. All of these are too few in number to provide, individually, any information on trends, but, taken together, they suggest that the rural economy was not incapable of change. The answer to the question posed earlier, about whether the decline in craft numbers had proceeded to the point where there were none left to lose, or whether

the declining trend was bottoming out, might therefore be that the declining older crafts were to some extent replaced by more recently established trades; blacksmiths and garages are an obvious example. On the other hand, although it might be expected that numbers in the building crafts would decline more in the northern and western parishes, where population decreased more than in the southern and eastern parishes, there seems to be no evidence that this was indeed the case. Over the whole county, in fact, numbers in the building crafts (i.e. the first four of those listed in table 1) were remarkably stable in the interwar period. The most important discovery of this survey, however, is that the rate of decline in the sixteen years between 1923 and 1939 was slower than it had been in the thirteen years between 1910 and 1923. In fact, although the numbers of those in the traditional crafts declined, albeit at a slower rate in the interwar period, the numbers of those in the trades in the lower half of the table, having initially declined, rose between 1923 and 1939 to exceed their previous level. And taking all the non-agricultural occupations together, the increase in these trades was more than enough to offset the decline in the crafts between the wars.

EXPLANATIONS

How, then, if it is difficult to demonstrate quantitatively that the interwar period was one of rapid decline in rural crafts and trades, can the undoubted upsurge in elegiac literature be explained? One possibility is that it was simply a delayed reaction to the undoubted changes which occurred before the First World War and between 1914 and 1920. Another is that the Rural Industries branch of the Ministry of Agriculture, the Rural Industries Bureau and the AERI at Oxford were all intent on justifying their existence, although how this might provoke writers into action is difficult to see. A third possibility might be to see it as a reaction to change, threat and uncertainty. Writing in another context, Verrier argued that the First World War 'had left behind a vengeful Germany, a prostrate France, an isolationist America, and had produced a fascist Italy and a revolutionary Russia ...'⁵⁴ The old continental empires – the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, Hohenzollern German and Ottoman Turkish – which must have been remembered as political normality by the immediate post-war generation, had gone, to be replaced by new nations, democracies and totalitarian states. In the early 1920s King George V was said to be 'in a funk' about the 'danger of revolution', and in 1929 Beatrice Webb wrote of the 'senile hypertrophy' of the Empire.⁵⁵ In the decade of the General Strike and

⁵⁴ A. Verrier, *The Bomber Offensive* (1974), p. 32.

⁵⁵ P. Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s* (2000), pp. 43–4; see also M. Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (1999).

the Great Crash the economy as a whole, not just the rural economy, was challenged. By the 1930s writers on both the left and right of the political spectrum were united in perceiving capitalism to be in crisis and decline. A global revolution leading to a socialist world state was an inevitability, according to H. G. Wells.⁵⁶ All over the world lower economic growth rates and higher inflation and unemployment led many to 'the belief that something was fundamentally wrong with the world they lived in'.⁵⁷ And in the countryside, this was a period in which more land changed hands than in any other short period since the dissolution of the monasteries.⁵⁸ Is it any wonder that some, such as the Elmhursts and Rolf Gardiner, looked for radical solutions, while others looked for stability? In such a world the traditional crafts represented a haven of predictability, calm and comfort. Their continued survival meant that something remained of the old safe world; their disappearance implied the triumph of a newer and quite possibly less comfortable way of ordering society, especially in the eyes of the middle-class book-buying public.⁵⁹

The willingness of the book consumer of the time to subscribe to the ideas and values implicit in the works of the wheelwright (Sturt) and carpenter (Rose) mentioned in the title of this chapter, and their contemporaries, is therefore part of the process of constructing the image of the period.⁶⁰ Subsequent investigations, especially those by Saville and Williams in the Dartington Hall Studies in Rural Sociology series, strengthened the picture so produced.⁶¹ Miss FitzRandolph and Miss Hay, the two ladies from Oxford, and the sources of their funds, such as the Ministry of Agriculture, the Development Commission and the Rural Industries Bureau, were less elegiac in their approach, but their effect was much the same: they identified rural crafts and trades as a problem worthy of the policymaker's attention. It is immaterial that their solution to the problem differed from those who, by inference at least, simply wanted to maintain the world as it was for the sake of what they perceived as its traditional virtues. The existence of a policy implied that there was a problem to be solved. That there had indeed been a problem is suggested by the decline in numbers in rural crafts and trades in the years before and immediately after the First World War; whether the problem continued

⁵⁶ Brendon, *The Dark Valley*, pp. 168–9.

⁵⁷ E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (1994), p. 102.

⁵⁸ P. Dewey, *War and Progress: Britain, 1914–1945* (1997), p. 160.

⁵⁹ See Brace, 'A pleasure ground for noisy herds'; R. Moore-Colyer, 'Back to basics: Rolf Gardiner, H. J. Massingham and "A Kinship in Husbandry"', *Rural History* 12 (2002): 85–108.

⁶⁰ Sturt, *The Wheelwright's Shop*; Rose, *The Village Carpenter*.

⁶¹ Saville, *Rural Depopulation*; Williams, *The Country Craftsman*.

to exist in the same form for most of the two interwar decades is much less clear. The Devon evidence suggests that, in some parts of the county at least, numbers were stabilising or perhaps even increasing. The fact that the composition of the rural crafts and trades sector in 1939 was not the same as in 1919 does not mean that rural craftsmen had vanished, although it may mean that they had adapted to changing economic circumstances. The two ladies from Oxford recognised this as early as 1926, and welcomed it; the wheelwright and the carpenter recognised it too, but certainly did not welcome it. And their sense of loss has been remarkably influential in constructing our view of socio-economic change between the wars.