

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Inarticulate Few: Agrarian voices during the modernisation of agriculture in Leicestershire 1935–1955

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Abstract

Leicestershire experienced a uniquely pronounced shift from pastoral to mixed arable agriculture during the Second World War, with changes to farming practice being overseen and enforced by the County War Agricultural Executive Committee. The invasive powers of such Committees have led them to be criticised in recent historiography as an affront to individual freedoms. Opposition and resentment towards these policies would surely be most pronounced where they caused the greatest change – in Leicestershire. This article studies oral testimonies, alongside corresponding farm surveys from the period to provide a more objective basis for comparison, to reveal contemporary farmers did not share the negative historiographical characterisation of wartime policy. By the mid-1950s, agriculture in Leicestershire had embraced the ‘modern’ scientific methods demanded by the committees, but farmers’ recollections of the committee appear to span from favourable to, at worst, ambivalent. They considered the committee’s demands and methods necessary and for the most part, entirely reasonable.

The magnitude of Leicestershire’s transition from pre-war pastoral tradition to mixed arable farming makes it a nationally significant example of wartime changes in agricultural policy. By the 1930s, arable acreage had declined to almost a tenth of the county’s agricultural area of around 450,000 acres (Figure 1) The eastern part of the county particularly was renowned for its rich grasslands, a reputation pre-dating the Civil War.¹ Upon the outbreak of war, ‘the famous pastures of Leicestershire’ were earmarked for ‘new wheat belts’.² The arable acreage almost quadrupled from 53,101 acres in 1939 to 191,796 acres in 1943.³ This transformation was a nationally publicised example of agricultural modernisation. The 1944 government history *Land at War* declared Leicestershire farmers’ endorsement of scientific practices as so transformative it was tantamount to a change in profession: ‘we weren’t farmers in this part of the world, we were graziers’.⁴

Although the nation-wide arable acreage has declined since the 1950s, the wartime emphasis on mixed farming and arable over grazing has endured in Leicestershire, with the decline in arable acreage from the extremes of the wartime plough-up largely offset by widespread adoption of rotational grass leys. These enduring changes to farming practice in the county converted a grassland district to one representative of nationwide trends, Leicestershire’s arable acreage comparable to the national average.⁵

The wartime administration that ushered this change delegated authoritarian powers to county War Agricultural Executive Committees (WAECs) overseen by appointees selected by the Minister. The Leicestershire Committee was chaired by J. T. Jacques until July 1940, followed by

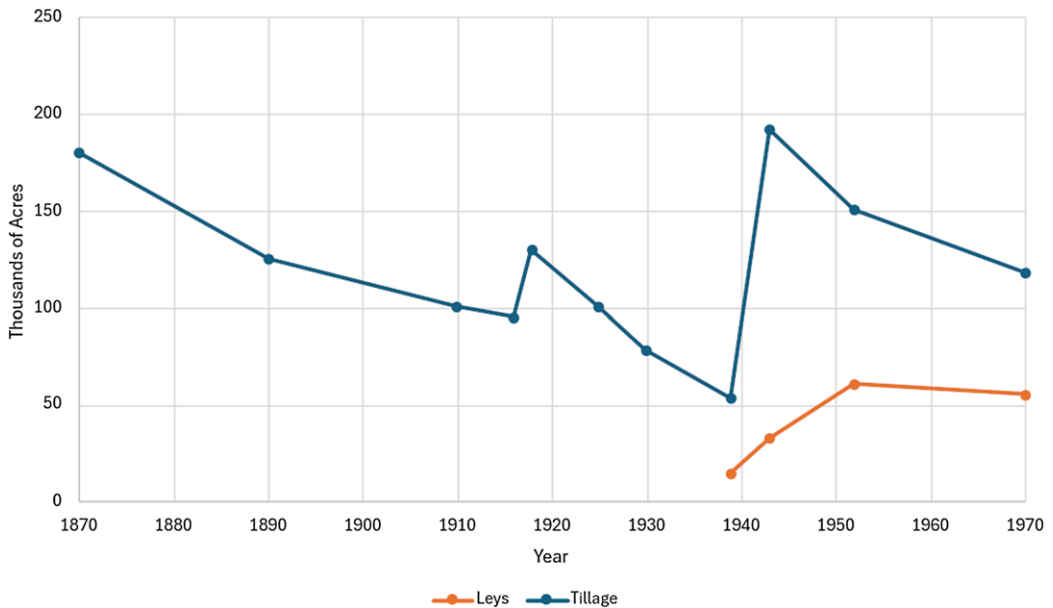


Figure 1. Cultivated area of Leicestershire 1870–1970.

Sources: R. M. Auty, *The Land of Britain: The report of the Land Utilisation Survey of Britain, Part 57, Leicestershire*, D. Stamp ed. (London, 1943), p. 273.

N. Pye, *Leicester and its Region*, (Leicester, 1972) p. 325.

P. F. Astill until April 1944, before Lord Cromwell was appointed.⁶ The county Committee oversaw district sub-committees, staffed by volunteers experienced in agriculture and familiar to the local farmers. This brought administration to farm-level. County-wide sub-committees also existed to organise resources pertaining to specific problems like land drainage and labour (liaising with the Women’s Land Army). Minister Dorman-Smith granted the committees ‘as free a hand as possible to get on with the job’, trusting these ‘men with very good local knowledge’ to reduce Britain’s reliance on food imports.⁷ These committees were empowered to enter, survey, direct and (subject to ministerial approval) requisition farms, increasing production through ploughing orders demanding cultivation of pasture for rotations of consumable crops. Orders warned their recipients that ‘failure to comply with this direction or any part thereof is an offence under the Defence Regulations’.⁸ Even the most stringent wartime measures theoretically remained long after the war, with rights for ‘acquisition of land by Minister to ensure full and efficient use thereof’ repealed only in 2004.⁹

Achieving the maximum possible increase in production required informed administration of resources in private ownership. To this end, the WAECs carried out a systematic audit of every holding over 5 acres in size, the 1941 National Farm Survey. This national audit catalogued every farm’s land, stock, infrastructure and practices, with each farmer being graded A-C on aptitude. Being assessed by local officers, some regional variation and personal prejudice is present in the survey: some farmers gain negative assessments despite good productivity for reasons like ‘temperament’, ‘inexperience’ or ‘youth’. It also lacks qualitative assessments of production, although the emphasis on quantity reflects the utilitarian intent of agricultural policy in the early years of the war. Farmers incapable of intensive production were exposed by the NFS’ minute detail, which informed the WAEC’s interventions. Advice was brought to farmyards by officers, ‘the first contact many a farmer has ever made with agricultural science’, while threshing and

labour gangs were distributed as the committees saw fit, and in some cases incapable farmers suffered evictions.¹⁰ Government-approved farming methods were enforced on Leicestershire's farms.

Yet a profound lack of ordinary agrarian voices characterised the public discourse surrounding this change and the rural reconstruction that followed after the war. It was acknowledged by prominent grassland scientist George Stapledon that the countryside was the 'prerogative' of a 'few, almost inarticulate in reference to the destiny of the nation'.¹¹ Did those engaged in agriculture, already a socio-economic minority by the 1930s, share the government's ideas concerning modern agriculture? Or did those living on the land come to resent the WAECs as measures were imposed upon them? The farmers' unheard assessments of these policies must be brought to light if we are to fairly assess the introduction of scientific farming to Britain.

Farmers as 'victims': WAECs in historiography

Unfortunately, opinions of farmers have remained equally opaque in histories of the period. There is an enduring tendency (perhaps understandable in broad surveys) to aggregate farmers' attitudes within statistical evidence, supplemented with 'notorious' anecdotes like Hampshire farmer Ray Walden's armed stand-off with police after an eviction order, resulting in his death.¹² This often produces a hostile characterisation of the WAECs as an inflexible and sometimes unreasonable method of administration, arbitrarily restricting farmers' freedoms to use (and even inhabit) their private property as they should wish.

Brian Short focuses on the role of state surveillance in his assessment of the NFS Surveys, leading to discussions of 'draconian controls'. He considers the lack of objective qualitative evaluation 'seriously flawed', deeming the NFS riddled with 'inadequacy, errors, inconsistencies and incompleteness', implying wartime interventions were based on partial evidence and therefore had a propensity to be misguided.¹³ He claims WAECs were designed to 'bully, persuade and encourage' farmers, but such a conclusion must correlate with opinions of contemporary farmers if it is to be taken as an accurate reflection of the Committees' character.¹⁴

Short's references to Leicestershire's CWAEC focus primarily on the constitution of its committee rather than the experience and assessments of farmers in the county. He implies Leicestershire's committee was mired in class conflict, frequently referring to Lord Cromwell's chairmanship to suggest a social division between the committee and the farmers it oversaw. Short presumes that Cromwell, as a military man, would not have possessed the characteristics demanded of chairmen in a January 1941 Commons written answer; knowledge of local agricultural conditions, confidence of the rural community, administrative ability and a sense of public duty.¹⁵ But through the most transformative years of the war, until April 1944, Leicestershire's CWAEC was chaired by farmers. Astill held a farm in the village of Cossington in the north of the county. Contrary to Short's suggestion, the impression Leicestershire's committee left on its farmers, which seems at worst amicable, was likely a result of the fact that it was not overrun by the landlord class during the crucial years of the war.

Short's assessment of 'working farmers' acting voluntarily on committees also appears unduly negative, suggesting they would 'pull no punches when it came to dealing with those not seen to be "doing their bit"'.¹⁶ This seems to draw an arbitrary ideological distinction between working farmers on committees and those receiving directives. While this would undoubtedly have been true in some instances, it is difficult to agree with this as a general assessment – Short himself details the resignation of a farmer from the Lutterworth District Committee in Leicestershire following an indictment for 'Bad Farming', which indicates a desire to lead by example rather than coercion.

Although Short's assessment does not align with the experience in Leicestershire, it is likely there was greater than usual resentment towards the WAEC in Hampshire, a county with more large-scale tenant farmers than was typical of the Midlands. Short refers to Hampshire extensively. He dedicates a chapter to the anecdotal case of Ray Walden, and refers to the harassment of Rex Paterson, a large-scale dairy farmer, by his landlord the Earl of Portsmouth.¹⁷

Portsmouth was vice-chair of the Hampshire Committee and an influential member of many of its sub-committees.¹⁸ But his actions and influence mean Hampshire's example cannot be taken as representative because of Portsmouth's open hostility towards farmers as a social class. Influenced by William Sanderson's *Statecraft*, Portsmouth wanted a conservative revolution to restore peasantries and re-establish the aristocracy as the ruling class both in politics and on the land.¹⁹ He bankrolled multiple organisations to this end and was involved in an attempt to hijack the Conservative Party in 1930 to install Lord Loyd, former Governor of Bombay and "Diehard" Tory as a 'temporary dictator', under whom reforms may be enacted.²⁰ Portsmouth was the chair of the Central Landowners Association, an organisation promoting the landed interest, and the Hampshire Committee rejected an offer of assistance from prominent agricultural scientist Daniel Hall, despite the ministry encouraging use of academics by Committees and Hall's experience working in Whitehall during the First World War.²¹ This remarkable fact was undoubtedly linked to Portsmouth's hatred of scientists, believing they were displacing the traditional advice of the squire and in consequence eroding the social position of the landlord class.

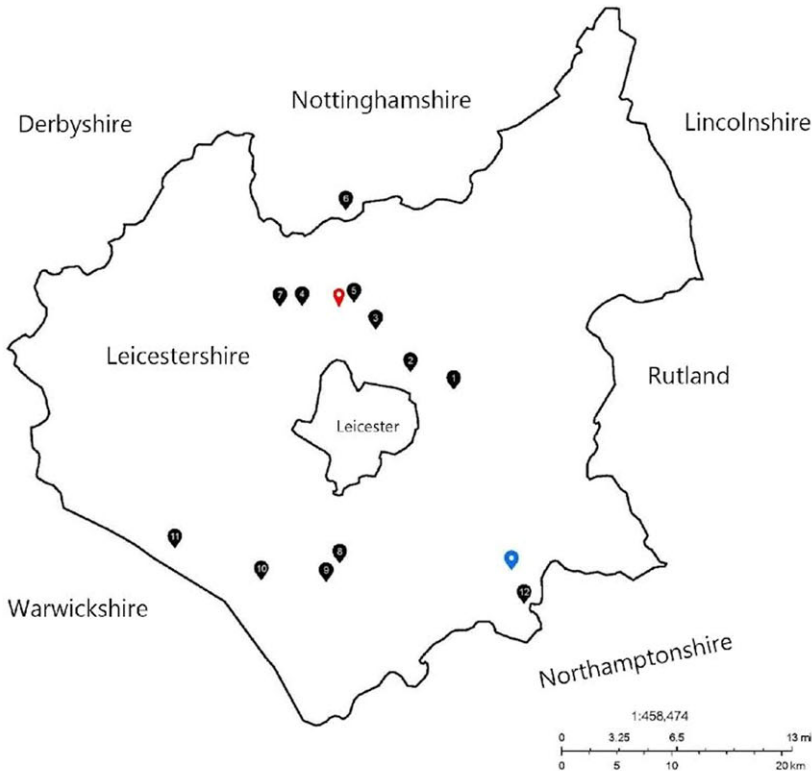
It is no surprise that Portsmouth might attack a large, progressive, independent, and successful tenant like Rex Paterson. Hampshire's case is perhaps an example of a WAEC using what Short quotes A. G. Street to characterise as 'Nazi Methods', but is a very extreme example.²² The Earl of Portsmouth was a known Nazi sympathiser and was opposed to tenant farmers as a threat to the Landlord's control of the countryside. Hampshire's experience cannot be considered universal or even widespread – although Short lists multiple committee chairs with 'prestige indicators', a closer study of Leicestershire reveals Lord Cromwell was appointed only in 1944 and that fact seems to have no impression whatsoever on the minds of the county's farmers.²³ The sources investigated in this study revealed no evidence that Leicestershire's committee was weaponised against farmers by those serving on it.

Investigating the views of those working the land in Leicestershire, as a county profoundly transformed by the WAEC directives, is necessary if we are to escape this negative historiographical characterisation of the committees. Hampshire's example and the case of Ray Walden, although important, do a disservice to committees in other regions which achieved great increases in production without antagonising cultivators, suggesting this mode of administration was not inherently unjust. Surveying the opinions of the ordinary farmers who oversaw these great changes in their landscape would also cast light on farmers' sense of identity and duty, helping to displace the government from the centre of the narrative – the Ministry itself was keen to delegate power to avoid 'farming from Whitehall', for which it was criticised in the previous war.²⁴

Methodology: testimonies in context

This paper seeks to investigate the agrarian cultural perspective regarding the technological, economic, and social changes in this period through oral testimonies from Leicestershire farmers taken in the 1980s by the Manpower Services Commission, held by The East Midlands Oral History Archive. These testimonies were taken from farms across Leicestershire (Figure 2) and provide assessments from ageing farmers looking back at changes in their industry. The testimonies follow the course of the wartime changes neatly as these farmers grew up in the early 20th century, reached adulthood before or during the war and by the 1980s most were retired or had become the 'old man' of the farm, with their children driving the businesses. Through these testimonies, we may insert the voices of cultivators into the prevailing narratives around wartime

Locations Relating to Testimonies within Leicestershire



* = farm worked by an interviewee

Farmer, Farm / Parish

- 1) *Barnett, Sycamore Farm / Hungarton
 - 2) *Kirk, Glebe Farm / *A.H. Pick, Colby Lodge / R.E. Pick, Hamilton Grounds / Barkby
 - 3) *Bell, The Grange / Cossington
 - 4) Siddons, Lower Broombriggs, / *Wainwright, Hanging Stone Farm / Woodhouse
 - 5) *Bird, Cream Lodge / Bird Jr. Brook Farm / Crookes, Pawdy Rise Farm / *Crookes Jr. Hey Hill Farm / Barrow-On-Soar
 - 6) *Beeby, Dales Farm / Rempstone
 - 7) *Siddons Jr., Hill Farm / Charley
 - 8) *Reynolds, Lodge Farm / Willoughby Waterless
 - 9) *Bevin, Holt Farm / Ashby Magna
 - 10) *Ball, Home Farm / Frolesworth
 - 11) *Spencer, Hollycroft / *Mayne, Sunny Side Farm / Hinckley
 - 12) *Nettleton, WLA district HQ / Great Bowden
- Blue**) Five Langtons, Centre of Welland Valley pastures
- Red**) Quorn, Foxhunting centre

Figure 2. Locations relating to testimonies within Leicestershire.

farming, and see whether they are acceptable to the 'inarticulate few'. To avoid some of the common pitfalls of oral history, each testimony is used alongside the NFS entries for the corresponding farms. Hollycroft Farm in the sample in that it was run by Spencer's mother, Mrs

Goode. All other businesses are in the names of the interviewees, their fathers or brothers. The NFS provides an objective basis for comparison and provides contextual details on the farmer's land holdings, business practices, and aptitude. In some cases, it also reveals inaccuracy.

A grassland district: Leicestershire before the war

The vicious agricultural depression sparked by the 1921 repeal of the protectionist Corn Production Act made high-cost or high-risk systems of production unviable for many British farmers.²⁵ Pasture-based 'dog-and-stick' farming took precedence and arable farming declined. By 1931, social effects of rural destitution were pronounced. The impoverished countryside was economically unable to oppose ribbon development, while lower rural employment levels fuelled migration to cities, eroding the traditional village structure which was held in great cultural esteem.²⁶ A mild form of protectionism emerged. Agricultural Marketing Boards were established to control prices and encourage consumption, followed by restrictive import regulations in 1933.²⁷ This stimulated the dairy industry, but grass-fed herds did not require ploughing of pasture, and cultivations continued to decline.²⁸ Low priced cereals and other feed stuffs were imported in large quantities to feed livestock until the outbreak of the Second World War.

Throughout the 1930s, George Stapledon and geographer Dudley Stamp laid the groundwork for greater intervention as government interest in scientific research stations increased.²⁹ Stamp documented agricultural land use in his Land Utilisation Survey, which he considered 'an essential prelude to large scale planning'. He found 'a steady decrease in the arable acreage of Britain, offset mainly by an increase in permanent grass'.³⁰ Stamp's findings ring true of Leicestershire. The NFS entries for 19 farms corresponding to the oral testimonies – run by interviewees or their sons – averaged 62% pasture in 1941 despite the plough-up orders of 1939–1941 and a £2/acre subsidy for cultivating permanent pasture, far above farmers' costs.³¹ Only one farm had no dairy production (although it reared cattle in a cooperative with the neighbouring holding), meaning all farms practised grass-based pastoralism. 38% of the farms had sheep while 88% kept pigs, although 55% kept only 1–3 for household consumption. 83% kept poultry, mostly in large numbers (from 50 to 1257), with one keeping 6 for household consumption. Amidst price uncertainty, cash crops had been abandoned. Farmers erred towards self-sufficiency, keeping a variety of stock as a bulwark against price fluctuations.

Despite ubiquitous pasture-based production, there seem to have been two prevalent attitudes amongst Leicestershire's farmers. Some of them found the economic headwinds restrictive, like Bird. His 'base interest had always been the arable side of it' yet he 'found the economics made it so I had to get onto the dairy side'.³² Pick explained that his father ploughed a six-acre field like 'most farmers' to 'grow a bit of straw and a bit of corn for their own use', but did no more as cash crops would yield a loss. This seems common; Crookes recalled that it was 'very hard to sell anything pre-war'.³³ These businesses were frequently operating below the cost of production, made possible through unpaid family labour. Barnett's father 'couldn't really afford to pay [his son] full wages'. Pick, Bevin, Siddons, Smith, Spencer and Bell reported similar situations.

While economic forces make a fitting macro explanation, a second group of farmers were invested in pasture-based production for which Leicestershire was renowned. The Welland Valley in the south-east of the county had 'some of the best pastures in the world', publicised in J. Llefelys Davies' 1928 study of the area. He considered ploughing in Leicestershire 'not likely to achieve prosperity' as 'the land, being heavy and difficult to cultivate, is unsuitable for tillage'.³⁴ *Land at War* reflects the pride these farmers took in their pastures, quoting a former grazier; 'it'd taken some of us nigh on 50 years to get the grass in [its pre-war] condition'.³⁵ Reynolds affirmed that come the war, the Welland Valley farmers 'would do anything sooner than plough it up'.³⁶ But preference for pasture farming was seen across the county. The NFS entry for Ball's farm, to the south of Leicester, succinctly captured his father's attitude to WAEC directives; 'his heart is not in

ploughed land'.³⁷ Even farmers considered amenable by the WAEC like Barnett were described as having 'no knowledge of arable farming', having forgotten the practice during the depression, with 'lack of energy' and 'lack of initiative' also common indicators of passive resistance to ploughing.³⁸

This tendency to lose skills required for arable farming and take pride in less productive forms of agriculture was accentuated by the solitary existence of many pre-war farmers. Recalling their childhoods, Bird and Crookes explained 'sometimes you wouldn't see a soul for weeks on end' and 'you'd come home from school winter nights and you wouldn't see no one'.³⁹ With little outside contact, bad practice could become ingrained within families. Pick believed poor education contributed here. 'Most of the old farmers were very sceptical and suspicious about these "farming from books" as they called it. Very few farmers kept books in those days, my father never did'.⁴⁰ Crookes' NFS proves even the most basic good practice could be neglected; his 'farm has not been worked in any rotation and has grown too much wheat over a number of years'.⁴¹

Tenant farmers also struggled with landlords, who Ex-Agriculture Minister Christopher Addison acknowledged had 'practically ceased to be a partner in husbandry' by the outbreak of the war.⁴² Landlords didn't assist with drainage and capital as they once had, while impoverished farmers couldn't afford improvements. Only 16% of the farms corresponding to testimonies were entirely owner-occupied, with 36% of farmers owning the majority of their land. This means most farmers had to contend with landlords. Stapledon considered this a great obstacle to agricultural prosperity, writing 'it is not only that the plough has disappeared completely from whole districts ... but that it is looked on askance by landowners'. Dual ownership came with 'restrictive covenants' in tenancy agreements, considered worse for improvement than an 'owner-occupier devoid of resources'.⁴³ Landlords were particularly invasive in the foxhunting districts of Leicestershire, encouraging preservation of grasslands for bloodsport, as Barnett explained. 'Before the war there was no ploughed land anywhere around here' allowing the 'hunt to prosper'.⁴⁴ Ball agreed, recalling little farmer opposition to the hunt pre-war as 'there was no ploughed land so water-filled hoof marks over winter didn't damage wheat'.⁴⁵ Landlords preserved low-productivity agriculture. Barnett remembered Hungarton parish having only one arable field, 20 acres used by Lord Hungarton for poultry feed (perhaps for game birds), suggesting squires did have the means to foster cultivations if inclined to do so. Owner-occupiers typically had more control over access to their ground. Bird didn't allow hunting on the 'patch' he owned outright, but ground he rented was used for bloodsport.⁴⁶

In rare instances, the disadvantages tenant farmers faced were somewhat offset by provision of infrastructure. Crookes got water from the Quorn hunt's pipes, where water had previously been carted from wells.⁴⁷ Opposition to landlords' sports ranged from muted to pronounced, from Bird's 'we didn't mind' to Pick's 'landowners were very bad in the '30s you know'.⁴⁸ Reynolds alone invited hunting on his farm, perhaps for social reasons: as a prominent figure in the NFU post-war, he may have been an individual predisposed to seeking status within the local elite. As a predator of rabbits, most farmers would not have considered foxes pests.

A moment of unity: wartime government intervention

Upon the outbreak of hostilities with Germany, the government embarked on a campaign to increase production through the WAECs. This approach required a conception of a 'good' farmer's attributes. Broadly, this seems to have been those more amenable to financial incentive, education and cultivation. The three farmers ranked 'A' (Pick, his brother, and Bell), had an average of 51.25% pasture, lower than the 'B' Farmers' average of 63%. Those who had taken pride in pasture-based production were forced to conform, although interestingly the testimonies reveal no animosity towards this fact. The necessity of the change was accepted on farms amenable to cultivation and protective of their pre-war pasture alike, as Siddons explained; 'policy had to change then. The minister for agriculture sorta directed you to what sort of farmer they wanted'.

Ministry men visited or ‘drove around to see without calling’ or used the NFS to ‘look at the paperwork to compare’ increases in output.⁴⁹ No testimony defended evicted farmers, although they were not chastised: most cases mentioned seem to have been due to frailty.

Eviction of any stubborn opponents likely reduced the opposition to the WAECs visible in the testimonies, as no evicted farmers were interviewed. Reynolds recalls ‘quite a few farms they did take over. They were farmed by the old boys in the old ways . . . they didn’t expect much out of life so long as they had enough to live on’.⁵⁰ Colby Lodge Farm’s NFS reveals that LCWAEC ‘turned out the late tenant in 1941’, and granted the farm to Pick and his brother, who ushered in ‘a great improvement’.⁵¹ Bell also acquired more land during the war. That evictions took place in 1941 is telling – less productive tenants were given time to improve and respond to WAEC directives and were removed from their holdings after two or more years of failure from the start of the war.⁵²

Support from the government and other farmers with the cultivations made the effort physically easier and less mentally daunting. Crookes ‘ploughed quite a lot up for other people’, as ‘there was nothing else to do’.⁵³ Pooled labour seems to have been common.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, contractors worked closely with the WAEC, who prescribed them farms to plough or thresh in order of priority.⁵⁵ Mayne’s characterisation of the WAECs as existing ‘to help farming out’ suggests such assistance left a favourable overall impression and overshadowed the threat of coercion, unrealised in most cases.⁵⁶ The employment of land girls in threshing gangs was greatly appreciated by farmers. Siddons considered them ‘damn good, very good. Good girls, they worked well’.⁵⁷ Bell enjoyed the company. He ‘used to get on very well with them’ as he ‘was a young lad then’.⁵⁸ The only somewhat disparaging accounts land girls derived from physiology or experience, with Barnett saying ‘you couldn’t expect the same as you’d expect from men’ as ‘many came out of the town’, but this was prefaced with ‘they always worked well’.⁵⁹ Ball concurred; ‘all the heavy work I had to do myself so I decided I’d apply for prisoners’.⁶⁰

Prisoners of War were even more favourably received. ‘All sorts’ of nationalities reached Leicestershire, with Ball describing his four Germans as ‘grand chaps . . . the best workmen I’ve ever come across’, despite one being ‘a bit of a twister’.⁶¹ The reception of POWs was invariably informed and measured, without prejudice even in the context of war. The only instance of negativity was balanced by positive reflections of other nationalities. Barnett ‘couldn’t get on with’ Lithuanians and Ukrainians, as they refused to do the ‘wet job’ of cutting kale, but ‘got on well with the Germans, and so did my neighbours’, also describing Poles as ‘real characters, very good’.⁶² Farmers seemed pleased to share their practices with POWs.

Prisoners undertook improvement work, doing ‘jobs that had been neglected because there was no one around to do them’, notably draining and ditching. Bird saw ‘no way father and I, or my brothers on their own little bits, could keep the drainage anything like’.⁶³ Leicestershire’s WAEC replaced the landlord’s assistance that had been sorely lacking. Leicestershire’s Ditching Subcommittee minutes suggest farmers leapt at this opportunity, noting ‘increasing numbers of applications for labour . . . in connection with the Italian POWs doing valuable work’.⁶⁴ The committee also possessed nine mole ploughs and four ‘heavy track-laying tractors’ by 1941, with work continuing after the war. Assistance with drainage was not simply a product of surplus labour but to reverse inter-war decline, giving the countryside ‘an air of busy thriving prosperity’.⁶⁵

It would seem most farmers accepted the government’s productive ideology as reasonable in the context of war, even if they didn’t take it to heart. Barnett considered the ploughing campaign ‘the best thing which could have happened for the farm because the old grassland was so rough it improved out of all recognition’.⁶⁶ The imperative ‘it’d got to be done, it’d got to be sown’ is consistent, albeit with slight ambiguity as to whether this was primarily through coercion or duty.⁶⁷ Siddons, despite an unfavourable NFS entry (‘appears to lack arable knowledge’), was not at all negative about the order to plough the ‘big meadow’ which was ‘never normally ploughed’. Renumeration for efforts softened the blow. ‘You wouldn’t lose anything [by complying] because they changed everything . . . you grew it to what they wanted and you had a subsidy for growing it’. He sees a necessity in the change; ‘that’s the way it had to go’.⁶⁸ Even in Daisy Wainwright’s

case wherein she details a poetic nostalgia for the lost pre-war countryside with its sleepy lanes and her father's 'Swiss meadow', her gripe appears to be more with the post-war effects of mechanisation than the plough-up campaign, which the testimonies describe, at worst, blandly.⁶⁹ The least enthusiastic accounts of the Leicestershire's WAEC describe its influence dispassionately rather than negatively, as providing 'lots of bits and bobs . . . not a great lot'.⁷⁰ The testimonies reveal Leicestershire farmers of varying land types and pre-war dispositions united behind the government's wartime measures, and considered them proportionate and justified even in peacetime looking back.

The farmer in reconstruction

With increased government support, public discourse quickly turned to how the agricultural industry might make this investment worthwhile and benefit the nation after the war. It was suggested agriculture might become an extension of the health service. Stapledon hoped 'the human nutritionist' although 'not yet in a position to issue his orders to the farmer' could expect to see 'a good many changes in position'.⁷¹ Others agreed the primary 'objective of agricultural production in this country should be to provide an adequate standard of nutrition'.⁷²

But most discourse on the role of the land in reconstruction was cultural and social. Stapledon opened *The Land: Now and To-Morrow* with an exploration of the 'the land in relation to the nation as a whole', as agricultural consideration alone 'to-day is not enough'. Even as an agricultural scientist he argued 'maximising farming' should be secondary to use of land 'for the recreation of the urban population' to remedy their 'disconcertingly low coefficient of rurality' through 'bringing the urban worker in closer contact with nature and the countryside'. In reconstruction, the farmer became subordinate to the social benefits of the countryside as an amenity.

But rural communities were to be preserved to oversee this amenity. 'The rapidity and success with which farmers and farm hands have made themselves mechanics' was cited as proof that farmers were diligent and flexible citizens, and held characteristics that could contribute much to British society after the war.⁷³ With Stapledon's influence the Scott Report on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas sought to protect rural communities from social decline and (more importantly) encourage social discourse with townspeople, wherein positive civic qualities may be shared. The Scott Report was formulated into policy in 1947. It held the 'cardinal problem' to be 'how to refocus cultural life within the village itself'.⁷⁴ 'A community or social centre' was suggested for each village to allow social revival without the 'paternal (or it may be dictatorial)' influence of squire.⁷⁵ Women's Institutes, Home Guards and 'feelings of working in a common cause' were considered to buck the pre-war trend of rural social decline and were taken as proof village communities could be preserved.⁷⁶

Scott's proposals had an economic backbone, suggesting better rural wages and amenities would insulate villages against the pre-war trends that saw agricultural workers leaving for the cities. Scott noted the new 60-shilling wartime minimum wage had sparked 'a resuscitation of village and country life'.⁷⁷ Even during the war, Scott believed 'the greater prosperity of agriculture has reduced the friction between rural and urban mentalities'.⁷⁸ Provisions were made to increase urban-rural social contact. Hostels and campsites were promoted. Stapledon advocated national parks and green belts to protect the countryside from urban development for the pleasure and enlightenment of the city-dwellers, so 'large numbers of urban workers [can] remain for appreciative periods in the country amidst truly rural surroundings'.⁷⁹ This would facilitate cultural integration, and the post-war urbanite may come to share the characteristics displayed by the country people during the war. The modern British citizen would spend time with rural people and learn from them 'how to remain in equilibrium with his surroundings, no matter how exacting and narrow'.⁸⁰

Yet Scott recognised social change ‘requires goodwill rather than money’.⁸¹ He acknowledged that evacuated urban adults, in contrast to children, ‘have found it difficult to adjust themselves to country ways’, clearly failing to adapt as desired.⁸² Yet the favourable reception of land girls and POWs on Leicestershire farms in the testimonies suggests Scott’s hopes for rural-urban cultural integration were not entirely wishful. Goodwill can be seen. In wartime, any negative conceptions of gender or nationality farmers may have held were easily surpassed by the new workers’ willingness to learn and fit within the local ways of doing things. *Land at War* celebrated this, noting ‘in two days a 19-year-old ex-dress-designer from Leicester gathered 327 carcasses’ in a single granary in her new role as a rat-catcher.⁸³ Scott had viewed this fact with hope, believing the Land Army demonstrated ‘a preference for country life’ while proving the townswomen could ‘adapt themselves to country conditions’.⁸⁴

These sentiments were shared by organisations in Leicestershire. The minutes of the Leicester and County Chamber of Commerce, a lobbying organisation for local industry, reveal a disproportionate focus on agriculture and a great interest in the preservation of the countryside. The Chamber noted that the

spread of industry from towns to villages has gone further than is good for agricultural welfare, or the amenities of the countryside. Planning should aim to restrict this tendency, confining industry to areas where mining and quarrying are indigenous.⁸⁵

LCWAEC’s chairman P. F. Astill contributed to the discussion, arguing ‘prosperous and efficient’ agriculture was ‘essential to social stability’ and the countryside ‘should not be allowed to decline’. He declared ‘production of food shall be maintained after the war’, and the work would allow the farmer a standard of living comparable to the urbanite. There were concerns that higher food prices might produce ‘a materially higher cost of living’ for the industrial workforce, in turn presenting ‘a real danger to our vital need to export’. But these concerns were allayed by Astill’s reassurance efficiency gains would keep prices low, and the chamber agreed ‘competition for cheapness should not influence the Government in formulating a sound agricultural policy’.⁸⁶ The Chamber wanted ‘to see the resuscitation of the village smithy and the village wheelwright’s shop’, adapted for mechanised farming. In education they wanted ‘more attention paid to nature study, to crafts, and to vocational training with agriculture as the focal point’.⁸⁷ This would mean a huge expansion from the single college at Sutton Bonnington providing technical agricultural training in Leicestershire before the war.

These policies reached farmers in the form of continued subsidies, along with regulations and guidance. LCWAEC distributed informative booklets on topics like *The Establishment and Management of Leys* written in concise, accessible language.⁸⁸ Education was necessary as ‘conditions in this county for ley establishment are not ideal’, it explained, but ‘experience in the past few years has made it clear that, provided a job is tackled in the right way, there is no more reason to fear a failure of [grass] seeds in Leicestershire than of any other crop’. Seed species, correct cultivations, the importance of applied lime and fertilisers are discussed. This extension in agricultural education was necessary for use of specialist technologies and chemicals introduced during wartime. Pick was well acquainted with agricultural lecturers, although conceded ‘a lot of the old ones had no time for these fellas’, suggesting something of a generational divide in willingness to be told how to farm. Familiarity with the inspectors could also mute their impact. Kirk believed ‘we knew as much of the job as they did’. Quality of advice was likely as varied as farmers’ propensity to take it.

Nevertheless, the effort was clearly successful. In 1939, 14,517 acres of grass in rotational leys existed in Leicestershire, extending to 32,741 by 1943 and the trend continued post-war, reaching 66,453 acres by 1952.⁸⁹ The increase in leys largely offsets the decline in arable acreage in Leicestershire following the early years of the war, indicating farmers settled down to productive

mixed farming with widespread use of the plough in line with Stapledon's advice and WAEC directives, rather than reverting to the county's traditional pastoral husbandry after the war.

A lost intimacy? Post-war reflections

While the immediate plough-up campaign was considered either necessary or good on Leicestershire farms, attitudes to later developments were more ambivalent. After the war, scientific farming methods were as ubiquitous as pasture-based production had been six years earlier, but farmers lost their wartime unanimity and split into two camps once again.

Utilitarian regulations initially designed to drive production were maintained into peacetime. The war saw poultry- and pig-keeping restricted as an inefficient use of grain. Pig numbers in the county declined from 33,739 in 1939 to 16,757 in 1943, and poultry from 855,406 to 377,550 in the same period.⁹⁰ Restrictions continued after the war, with Siddons recalling 'you were allowed to kill two pigs a year'.⁹¹ But increasingly, sanitary regulations were incorporated into these enduring invasive measures dictating acceptable on-farm practice, designing an agricultural industry to serve the health of the nation.

Barnett was proud of the quality of his turkeys pre-war, citing return customers as proof. But health regulations made such small-scale production unviable; 'for 80 turkeys you can't be putting special places up and tiling walls'.⁹² Yet this forced specialisation, increasing production overall. Leicestershire's poultry numbers reached 925,085 by 1952, rebounding from a 1943 low to above the 1939 figure of 855,406.⁹³

There was a perception that methods on modern specialised farms were less intimate. 'They don't like handling 'em quite as much as we used to', Crookes observed, 'we looked after the cows individually, tied singularly in the standings'. He presented a qualitative argument; 'we had to produce milk to a bit higher standard than they're doing today'.⁹⁴ This view likely derived from a shift from individual cow to herd management with specialisation post-war, overlooking the inefficient labour practices and poorer animal welfare inevitable when cows were tethered in stalls. Nevertheless, several farmers recalled their father's Lincoln Red herds, believing their replacement by Holsteins lost 'a better quality of milk, which you won't see now because everybody wanted the quantity'.⁹⁵ Improved sanitation and milk quality controls render these views sentimental.

Nevertheless, the majority of farmers viewed the shift to sanitary production favourably. Bird explained 'all these different regulations' were 'good, in the sense that the old way there was quite a lot of disease, some of us were free, some of us weren't'. Disease control measures like TB testing were

all a good thing and we had chaps come round to tell us we had to get the cowsheds up to standard, the hygiene standard. Some of the girls that used to take milk samples said we had some of the cleanest milk anywhere in Europe at that time, probably is even better now.⁹⁶

As a farmer graded 'A' by the NFS, it might be expected Bird was amenable to change, but the pride he took in his quality, and belief in continued improvement demonstrates the depth of his belief that 'irksome' regulations could be 'for the good of all of us'.⁹⁷ Many of the testimonies share Bird's view to consider the government's approach to be proportionate, reasonable and fair. With guaranteed prices for most commodities granted in the 1947 Agriculture Act, Farmers recognised that the government's 'tremendous involvement' meant 'the taxpayer pays quite a portion of the farmer's wages'.⁹⁸

Farmers were not as forthright as the Ministry of Agriculture in championing the power of technology, however. *Land at War* describes the natural world negatively and in military terms, branding pigeons 'insatiable marauders and very cunning'. Land reverting to nature was a 'sinister process', inefficient farmland likened to death through implied starvation; petrified bog-oaks in unimproved land are 'like oversized coffins in a churchyard'.⁹⁹ Science and technology were

considered able to overcome natural limitations. The worst excesses of this attitude can be seen in the 1947 Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme, where attempts to use military organisation to establish a three-million-acre monoculture farm in unsuitable climatic conditions failed catastrophically.¹⁰⁰ This rhetoric is absent from the testimonies. Machines were adopted for practical reasons rather than as a result of a profound ideological shift by farmers.

As a cost-cutting alternative to horses, tractors were readily seized upon in Leicestershire, with virtually all studied farms owning one by 1945. Herbicides replaced weeding and harrowing, with Reynolds' father's 'spudding' of thistles seeming ridiculous in hindsight. 'What we'd been trying to do for 30 years, one hour's spraying killed the lot, and that was it'.¹⁰¹ Yet farmers' suspicions of 'interference proceeding from purely theoretical considerations' articulated by Stapledon produced some hesitancy in adopting completely new technologies like insecticides. Presenting an additional cost, rather than making existing practices cheaper, uptake of insecticides only became widespread in the 1960s.¹⁰² Farmers did not place blind faith in science.

Economic forces also made pre-war systems unviable. The 1947 Agriculture Act's emphasis on stability and fairness for producers alongside efficiency and plenty for the consumer allowed farmers to specialise.¹⁰³ Where sanitary regulations didn't make pre-war business models unviable, the fact small-scale pig or poultry production 'can't compete with batteries' did.¹⁰⁴

Mechanisation continued to advance. 'The combines came and everything changed again'.¹⁰⁵ The countryside evolved to suit the machines, with Nettleton explaining how the 'tiny little patchwork quilt squares and triangles in lots of places had to be taken away altogether, the ditches filled in for these combine harvesters to get across'.¹⁰⁶ Most testimonies detail mechanisation's impact on the rural labour force, perhaps accentuated by the comparatively expensive 60-shilling minimum wage. As Mayne noted, 'it's done away with manpower. A lot of men would like to work on the land, but the money weren't there'. This explains changes in hedge management, with old methods of cut-and-laying being forgotten as people didn't want 'the six-pound days'.¹⁰⁷

Mechanisation's displacement of labour upended Scott's hopes for revived village communities. The relationships between farmers, their labourers and local tradesmen were lost to machines. Reynolds considered labourers to have been 'pushed off' by machines and 'very skilled men' qualified through the Agricultural Training Board. Beeby agreed, noting the number of genuine 'country folk' in his village Rempstone had declined catastrophically:

with the coming of the combine one man can get probably up to 60 to 100 acres a day . . . the labour force has dwindled enormously, there's only about eleven people in agriculture in Rempstone, four of them contractors.¹⁰⁸

Barnett was saddened by this change, with his parish Hungarton still 'very much a village' in 1936 where 'everybody worked together', with the 'Lady very keen on village life'.¹⁰⁹ This is the sole example of the paternalistic influences of the squires being recalled favourably.

Through this, the rural-urban cultural imbalance Scott attempted to address prevailed. Rural people continued to migrate to cities (Reynolds considered them 'natural wasties'). Crookes emphasised cultural dissonance, saying 'we haven't got the village [anymore], as in the townies [have] come in . . . what we call the foreigner'.¹¹⁰ Barnett's village was reduced to 'a dormitory, changed out of all recognition' after the war, although the displacement of countryside people by townsfolk enabled by mechanisation of agriculture did facilitate 'a good youth club'.¹¹¹ As such, post-war mechanisation provided space for townspeople in Leicestershire's villages. Scott's desire to see urban-standard amenities for village people did occur, but they catered for urbanites. The local mills were not resuscitated. The local butchers, smiths and wheelwrights were replaced by city professionals. Rempstone received doctors, professors, CEOs and accountants, becoming 'far more intellectual' in the process.¹¹²

New technical skill requirements led the remaining farmers to seek urban-style education in agricultural departments established in city universities, with Jean Morris earning a degree in

dairying at Cannington, Somerset before starting work on a farm post-war.¹¹³ This was the urbanisation of the rural population, contrary to Scott's intent: rather than re-invigorate the village structure and increase urban 'ruralicity', the push for agricultural education and the influx of commuting newcomers to Leicestershire's villages quickly made them more culturally urban than ever before. Nevertheless, there seems to have been some adoption of Stapledon's philosophy among the agrarian community. Beeby explained a sense of stewardship;

I feel that people who live in the country and get their living from the country, it's only fair to put back some of the gains you make or experiences you've had in the past for the benefit of future generations.

Beeby believed Rempstone's community 'changed very little', and rural life 'brings out the best in people'. Yet he saw no viable alternative. Without 'new development', there would be 'no support for the church, the village hall, the public house'. To complain of the influx of townspeople to villages was 'narrow-minded' in his view, as mechanisation displaced the old villagers' employment before the townsfolk moved in. The 'about six' agricultural workers in the village could not offer a viable social alternative.¹¹⁴

The mechanisation driving this influx of townspeople to the countryside undermined the reconstruction plans for rural-urban social cohesion. In actuality, 'the great return to nature' the Scott report intended to facilitate did not see the townsman accept the community function of the pre-war village tailor or smith. Agricultural specialisation allowed people moving to villages to retain their 'disconcertingly low coefficient of ruralicity'. Farmers worked with machines, not community support. For example, the Rempstone estate had ensured all cottages had their own pigsties in their gardens before the war, fostering household production of vegetables, poultry and pork even by non-agricultural families. But Beeby stated that this never returned after the wartime restrictions, with only one household keeping poultry after the war. The roadside allotments had been abandoned and grassed into the verge by the council. As such, rather than infusing country values and lifestyles into the wider population, the creation of dormitory villages simply exported urban social characteristics into the countryside, eroding the 'ruralicity' Scott sought to preserve. Cultural divides remained, with Crookes grumbling that the townsman 'tries to run [the village] to his type of life, he's got to blend into the countryside type of life'.¹¹⁵ Beeby acknowledged some of the newcomers to Rempstone 'do not want to know the country way of life'.¹¹⁶

The post-war disdain for the townsman expressed by farmers contrasts starkly with their enthusiastic acceptance of POWs and land girls, suggesting the continuing dissonance was a result of the townspeople failing to engage with the shrinking agrarian minority in the same way. As Scott noted, 'goodwill' would have been necessary for his conception of the post-war countryside to function effectively. Through this, the reconstruction policies failed to produce their desired effect, undermined by cultural dissonance and the continuing advancement of mechanised farming made possible by the economic protections enshrined in the 1947 Agriculture Act. The brief wartime resuscitation of village communities did not end the trend of social decline. Yet the continued urban-rural disconnect allowed the agrarian minority to retain their distinct cultural identity and centrality to the broader countryside.

A favourable assessment of the WAECs

Looking back over the changes experienced in their lifetimes, farmers were united in their belief scientific agriculture had no viable alternative, even if their feelings towards this fact were mixed. There was no suggestion pre-war methods were adequate for modern Britain, with Crookes musing 'that type of farming I don't think will come back, what we did in my young days'. Yet he retained a favourable disposition towards these older methods, lamenting a lost sense of intimacy

or ‘wholesomeness’: ‘it’s seat farming today, we were better when we walked’. He discusses his retention of the ‘sound’ pre-war practices with pride, even though these were, in effect, the practices Stapledon encouraged. Crookes ‘had always run the old-fashioned system of farming, rotation farming. We’ve always put leys in’, avoiding ‘the trouble of these big estate farms are going to run into where they ploughed all the lot up and they’ve gone for wheat, wheat, wheat [*sic*]’,¹¹⁷ This is in stark contrast with the NFS’ assessment of Crookes’ own farm, which it found to be ‘not in any rotation, has grown too much wheat over a number of years’, It seems Crookes’ recollections were inaccurate, but even so his testimony conceptually links Stapledon’s progressive advocacy of leys with the good practices of ‘the old-fashioned system’. Even those nominally retaining old methods were, in practice, conforming to the scientific age.

Farmers don’t seem to believe they benefited from these changes. Many considered the occupation overall to have become more complicated, even if mechanisation made individual jobs easier. As Mayne summarised:

things have altered to make things easier; I wouldn’t say better. You’ve got more responsibility, with tractors and that, and more expense, more pollution, you can’t have it both ways.¹¹⁸

Pick believed the regulatory pressures and the need to develop new skills for scientific methods increased pressures on farmers greatly. He considered pre-war ‘dog-and-stick’ management ‘a very easy-going job compared with today’, although the difficulties of post-war agriculture were entirely justified by increased output in his view.¹¹⁹ Barnett’s son, running the farm in the 1980s, looked through the business account books from 1936 and was surprised to see the finances roughly equivalent, despite the fifty years and great change in-between. ‘We’re dealing in thousands where you were dealing in twenties’, he remarked, ‘we’re not a shade better off’.¹²⁰ Turnovers had increased, but guaranteed prices simply allowed farmers to buy machines and chemicals they had not needed pre-war. Reynolds felt farmers had been placed in a bubble by science: ‘natural science in plant growing and plant development has outstripped the means of consuming it . . . they’ve only just broken the ice in plant development’.¹²¹

This study of Leicestershire demonstrates that British farmers, characterised in revisionist histories as ‘recalcitrant’, resistant to education and ‘victims’ of the ‘draconian’ WAECs were able and willing to unite behind a duty to feed the nation in a time of need.¹²² Despite some nostalgia present in the testimonies, the government’s productive philosophy and practices survived into peacetime and improvements continued to be made to Leicestershire’s productive output once coercive measures were drawn back.¹²³ Rough grazing in Leicestershire decreased by 29% between 1943 and 1952, with permanent grasslands increasing only marginally in the same period, from 217,931 acres to 230,510.¹²⁴ Agriculturally, therefore, wartime policies had enduring success. Stapledon’s concern that millions of acres would be re-grassed simultaneously post-war was needless as farmers retained fertility-restoring grass rotations.¹²⁵

Particularly as farmers present thoughtful and nuanced criticisms of the conditions of their industry, both pre-war and post-war, the fact that the testimonies do not criticise the WAEC undermines the negative characterisation wartime measures present in Short’s assessment of the period. Farmers considered the WAEC as a provider of economic help following the deep interwar depression rather than a draconian ‘bully’. Farmers also considered the presence of local volunteers on committees entirely unthreatening, contrary to Short’s suggestion, with Kirk noting ‘we knew as much of the job as they did’.¹²⁶ Revisionist narratives hostile to the WAECs simply don’t square with the majority experience of the WAEC’s dealings in Leicestershire, where radical change was achieved with remarkably little upset.

These testimonies illuminate the acceptance of scientific methods on Leicestershire farms, and in doing so shed light on the enduring disconnect between rural communities and the urban

policy makers that govern them. The wartime directives fit within a far broader trend of policy decisions from London dictating the shape of domestic agriculture since enclosure, from the plough-up campaign of the Napoleonic wars, the repeal of the Corn Laws through to the recent replacement of the Basic Payment Scheme with the Environmental Land Management schemes. The government has now diverged from the spirit of the 1947 Agriculture Act, to profound scepticism from the farming community. These testimonies and the modern-day farming press both defend the post-war settlement as necessary even when farmers don't consider themselves to benefit greatly from it. Farmers, then as now, share the postwar government's view that these policies had great social utility beyond rural communities and the countryside. Yet the recent reforms to rural policy and its attendant cultural movements concerning nature and the environment (surrounding 'rewilding', for example) continue to be produced through discourse between townspeople largely unmoved by profound scepticism from farmers. The opinions of cultivators cannot be overlooked if we are to construct an accurate view of the countryside, whether historically or in the present day.

The desire to bridge the rural-urban cultural divide in rural reconstruction was well-founded, as clearly urban Britons have an enduring interest in the state of their countryside and informed dialogue would merit informed policy. Regrettably, despite the remarkable successes of the WAECs, the ultimate effect of specialised agriculture was the complete erosion of the traditional village and rural way of life, destroying any potential for cultural or economic parity between town and country. Although retaining its distinct identity, post-war agricultural efficiency has caused the decline in the agrarian population continue and country people are perhaps even more 'inarticulate' today than in the 1930s, a direct consequence of the postwar policies designed, in part, to preserve their culture.

Notes

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