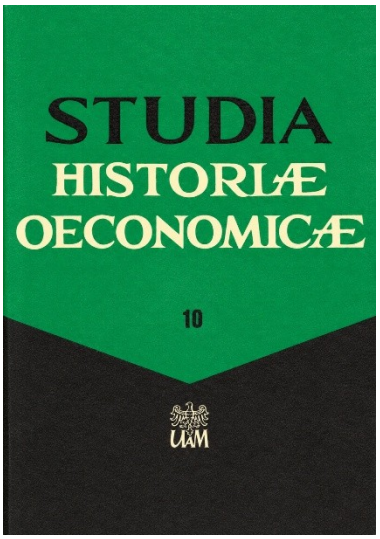


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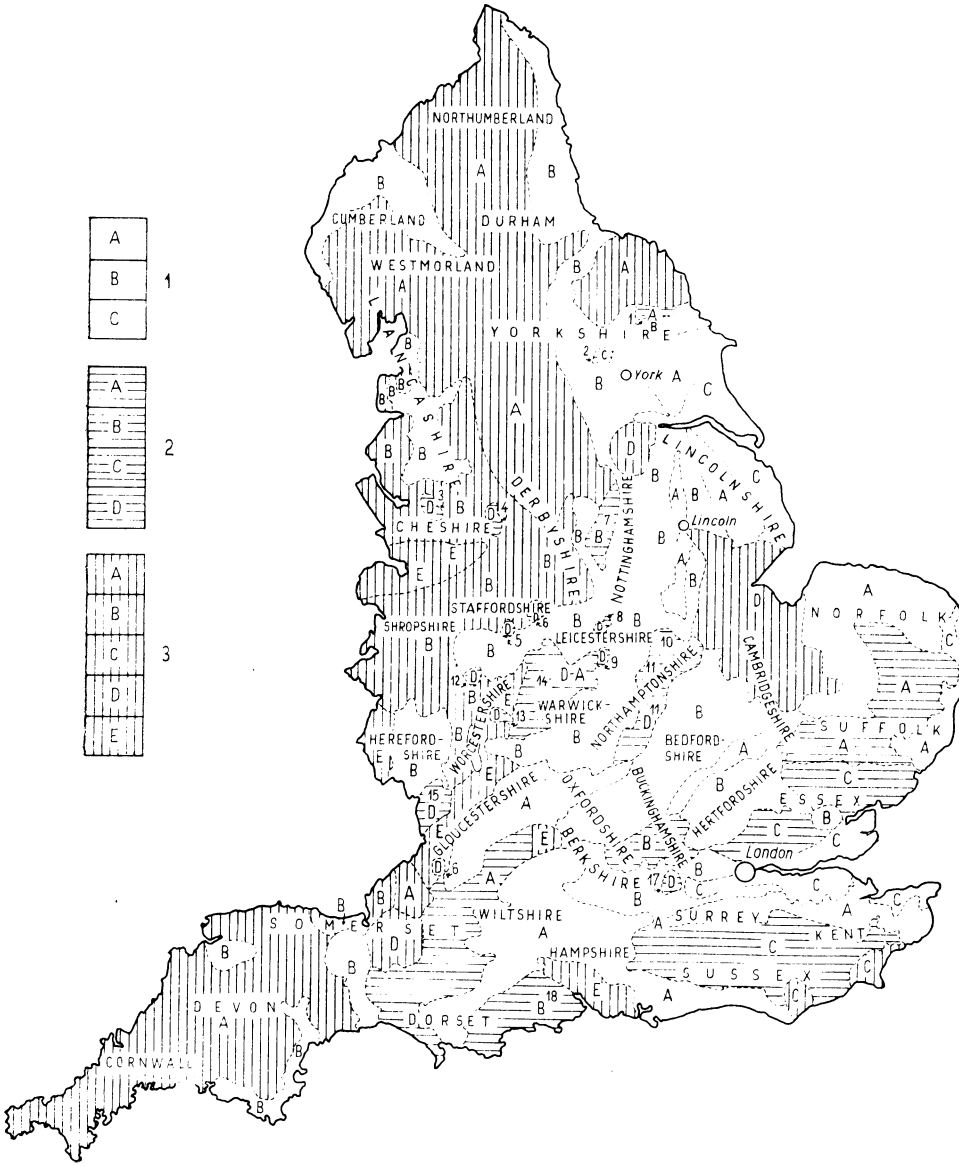
Joan Thirsk (Oxford)

THE PEASANT ECONOMY OF ENGLAND IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

The title of this paper simplifies a very complex situation. Even though England is a small country when compared with Poland, Germany, or France, it had in the seventeenth century not one peasant economy but many. These different farming systems had been shaped over many centuries. The first constraints were imposed by soils, topography, and climate. Then the labour of men continuously modified the natural landscape, while, at the same time, men built and changed the structure of their communities. Some fell under close lordly supervisions; some continued for centuries virtually without any. Different customs and conventions about the use of land by the community developed, and under different pressures they evolved in different ways. Communal control over natural resources was in some places strong, in others weak. By the seventeenth century, moreover, the peasant economy was being everywhere influenced by the market opportunities available in the neighbourhood. Many communities, especially in the south and east of England, had ceased to be self-supporting and had come to rely on essential supplies from other regions, either of seed, or animals, or fodder, or of food for their households. In short, they had embarked on agricultural specialization, which locked them ever more firmly into a national economic framework.

Benefits were derived from this more strongly market-oriented economy; specialization in, for example, cheese, or grains, or beef, encouraged economies of scale, and almost certainly produced better quality foodstuffs, which in turn increased demand and further enlarged the marked. But specialization made peasant communities more vulnerable when their markets suddenly closed up, as, for example, when the Dunkirk privateers in the 1630's prevented East Anglian cheese producers from carrying their cheese by coastal vessels to London, or when the supplies of essential raw materials or foodstuffs failed, as when the import of young cattle from Ireland was prohibited by Parliamentary Act in 1666 and the graziers of the Home Counties around London lost their supplies of young animals for fattening.

The second qualification that must be introduced into the title of this paper concerns the term "peasant". It has to be used loosely in English conditions. I mean by "peasant" an occupier of land for agricultural purposes who does not claim the title of gentleman, or rank as a landlord. It does not



Mixed farming types

1. A — Sheep and corn (on downland, woods, and brackland)
   B — Corn and stock variously combined (in clay vaks)
   C — Corn and stock fattening (in marshland)

Pasture farming types

Wood pasture

2. A — Dairying and pig-keeping, sometimes with horse-breeding
   B — Stock-keeping with corn-growing, sometimes with dairying
   Cj — Stock-fattening and pig-keeping
   D — Stock rearing and pig-keeping, sometimes with horse-breeding

Open pasture

make sense to separate owners of land (freeholders) from customary tenants (copyholders) and leaseholders, for it was not unusual for one man to hold land by two or all three forms of tenure. Moreover, some copyholders were as secure and favoured in their terms of tenure as freeholders, and some leaseholders were as advantageously placed (having long leases at fixed rents in a period of inflation) as customary copyholders.

A peasant economy, therefore, involves all classes of land cultivators, except gentry/landlords. We may then divide the peasantry into three main classes: (I) yeomen, who were substantial farmers with large acreage, who relied on a hired labour force. They were the upper class in peasant society; (II) husbandmen, who were the average farmers, with between 20 and 50 acres of land (10 - 20 hectares) plus common pasture rights, who worked their land with family help and some hired labour at busy seasons; (III) the labourer-cottager, or peasant labourer, who had no more than about 5 acres (2 hectares) plus common rights of grazing, and depended on wage labour to ensure subsistance. The labourer in some farming regions, however, had a considerable measure of independence. Besides his cow, hens, perhaps a pig, and a few acres of barley land, he might have more than one outlet for his labour in an industrial occupation.

Since three broad classes of peasants have to be differentiated, and as many as twelve different farming systems in England in the seventeenth century, it is not easy to speak of "the English peasant economy", as though it ran one course and offered the same standard of living to all peasants. But in recognizing that the total picture is a jigsaw made up of fragmented pieces, we are not fragmenting the investigation in order to seek refuge in many narrow byways, and avoid discussion of the larger topic. Rather we enlarge our understanding of the process of change, for the uneven rate of development of different farming regions, and the dependence of each on the agricultural specialities of the others acted as a positive economic spur to them all. When overpopulation afflicted one region, and land was in short supply, the neighbouring one was often undercultivated. It then attracted new settlers, who sometimes embarked on a strenuous programme of land improvement, importing ideas and skills learned in more advanced places. When cattle-fattening gathered momentum in parts of the East Midlands and in southern England, it made demands on the supply of young beasts from the north and west, which galvanized those farmers into action, and drew them more firmly into the national food market. Specialized farming regions, therefore,

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3. A — Cattle and sheep rearing (on fens and moorland)
   B — Rearing and fattening
   C — Fattening of sheep with some cattle
   D — Stock fattening with horse-breeding, dairying, fishing, fowling (in fenland)
   E — Dairying

generated their own inner momentum. Agriculture in the seventeenth century had within itself its own dynamic, quite apart from the economic spur administered by the growing towns, and by the expanding overseas trade in agricultural produce.

Against this background, then, any discussion of peasant motivation, and investment decisions, must start by recognizing the differing resources of different classes of peasants, and, more important still, the different capital requirements of different types of farming. These contrasts emerge clearly from local studies. In specialized corn-growing areas, the successful men were always yeomen farmers or gentlemen with substantial fortunes. Corn growing on a commercial scale required capital. Successful dairy farmers, on the other hand, included many husbandmen without much capital whose main asset was the labour of the family. Vegetable growers could make a living with next to no cash reserves so long as they could offer plenty of hand labour.

In short, some agricultural innovations and some farming for the market did not require great forethought and the investment of substantial cash sums. The dairy farmer with three or four cows slowly built up a larger herd. At first, he did not necessarily need more land; he simply exploited his common rights more fully, and improved the quality of his grassland by lime or ash, which he produced locally at little cost except in labour. Equipment for the dairy was not expensive, and might be accumulated gradually from one generation to the next. The dairy itself might be a room at the back of the house, or a modest building adjoining. The whole district in which our dairy farmer worked probably had a dairying tradition going back into the sixteenth and even into the fifteenth century. The farmer who produced more for the market than before was moving along a well-trodden path.

But this leads us to the deeper origins of agricultural innovation. Who first initiated improved farming methods, or introduced new crops, or explored a new market? Exact documentary evidence is not abundant, but when it does occur, it always offers the same answer. The initiative came from gentry or yeomen who were in closest touch with merchants and markets. They were the first to pick up gossip about a rise in the prices of this commodity, or a shortage of that commodity. They were the first to hear of new market opportunities in growing a novel crop. They also had the financial resources to take the risks. If their experiment succeeded and if the economic and social reorganization which it called for suited the local circumstances (money was not the only requirement), it did not take long for small peasants to imitate their example.

Illuminating lessons can be drawn from the history of tobacco-growing in England in the seventeenth century, for it illustrates the process, by which a new crop was introduced, in unusual detail. The crop was unknown until the later sixteenth century when a few apothecaries began to grow it in their

herb gardens, partly for medical purposes. Its commercial possibilities were realized in 1618 by a London merchant, the younger son of a gentry family from Gloucestershire in the West Midlands, who had been engaged in trade to Holland and had a salesman's expertise. He formed a partnership with another gentleman's son who had somehow acquired practical knowledge, presumably from abroad, of how to grow tobacco. The pair went back to Gloucestershire and hired land from neighbours and friends at unprecedentedly high rents to grow tobacco. They had to employ many workers on this labour-demanding crop and so, not surprisingly, failed in their attempts to keep the art of tobacco-growing secret. Within seven years tobacco was growing in 57 villages in Gloucestershire, Worcestershire, and Wiltshire. Within fifty years it was being grown in twenty-two counties in England and Wales and in the Channel Islands. Its cultivation had been banned by the government as early as 1619, but it continued to be grown until about 1690 when the law was finally and ruthlessly enforced. In the 1650's it was openly described as a poor man's crop[1].

The success of this new plant among poor peasants is thus explained in terms that are specific to this crop and take account of the particular structure of peasant society in this one district of Gloucestershire, the Vale of Tewkesbury. The most extravagant demand made by tobacco cultivation was for hand labour which the poor man could supply in plenty. It required little land to produce a large crop. Plants and manure were the only expense and these were paid for by the harvest. Tobacco varied greatly in price according to quality, but even the poorest tobacco found a sale among local people, for all classes of men and women quickly developed a taste for it. The peasant population in this area included a high proportion of small freeholders and secure copyholders. In many villages, churches or abbeys had been the principal landlords throughout the Middle Ages, and they had interfered little in their tenants' lives. At the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century new lay landlords did not succeed in diminishing their tenants' liberties. Indeed, some of the new lords lived on good terms of friendship with their tenants in pursuit of their mutual interest. They cooperated with tenants by giving permission for their land to be planted with tobacco, since they shared part of the high rent that was paid for it. Moreover, the original stimulus to grow it had come from members of their own class.

These emerges from this unusually well documented story a portrait of gentry/landlords which does not conform to our stereotyped images. Since we now accept the fact that the peasantry varied from region to region in

[1] A fuller account is given in J. Thirsk, *New Crops and their Diffusion: Tobacco-growing in seventeenth-century England*, in C. Chalklin and M. Havinden (eds.), Landscape and Society: Studies in English Regional History, forthcoming.

their privileges, liberties, and standards of living, it may also be necessary to classify the gentry into more than one type. A clearly defined social hierarchy displaying deep differences of interest between lords and tenants is a feature of old settled communities possessing well cultivated land. It is not so clear a feature in seventeenth-century England in less attractive farming areas, of which the Vale of Tewkesbury (where tobacco-growing began) is one. This was a low-lying river valley with large amounts of wet pasture, where poor drainage impeded cultivation, and where the population was more than usually mobile. Wealthy gentry in this area in the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, therefore, were younger sons of families whose main branches inhabited the more salubrious parts of the East Midlands. These disinherited younger sons (for primogeniture was becoming a strong custom in sixteenth-century England) had moved here because land elsewhere was fully occupied. They were only just beginning to work their way into the social hierarchy; in the seventeenth century the social pyramid still had a notably broad base and a low flat summit.

Explaining the success of agricultural innovations requires, in my view, a careful investigation not only of the economic circumstances, which stimulated them, but also of the society which fostered them. Another major seventeenth-century innovation was the floating of water meadows, which spread in prosperous corn-growing country, but again its success only makes full sense if the social as well as the economic environment is fully explored. Indeed, its first inventor himself tells the story, indirectly, of its partial failure in his immediate neighbourhood: it was socially inappropriate. The inventor was Rowland Vaughan, a well-to-do gentleman living in the Golden Valley in Herefordshire. He constructed dykes and drains through his meadows which enabled him to cover the grass with a few inches of water in certain seasons, and drain it off in others. In this way he forced an unusually early growth of grass in March and April and had lamb ready for the butcher several weeks earlier than anyone else; it commanded a higher price, in consequence. The work cost Vaughan many hundreds of pounds. But he lived among small dairy farmers who had no money to follows his example, advantageous though it would have been to them. So his neighbours continued to make their living from cheese and butter production, supplementing their living with flax and hemp weaving. Vaughan's invention was next taken up on the Earl of Pembroke's estates in Wiltshire, where large corn farmers were numerous. Thence it spread into similar corn country in Hampshire and East Anglia[2].

[2] J. Thirsk, *Seventeenth-century Agriculture and Social Change in Land, Church, and People.* Essays presented to Prof. H. P. R. Finberg, ed. J. Thirsk, Agricultural History Review Supplement, vol. 18, 1970, pp. 153 - 4. The method of watering meadows is more fully described in E. Kerridge, *The Agricultural Revolution* (1967), pp. 251 ff.

On the best corn producing lands such as those already mentioned — on the chalk downlands, limestone uplands, and on the light loams and brecklands of Norfolk and Suffolk — society was structured in a strongly hierarchical way. Some lords occupied manor houses in the villages and lived like kings in their kingdoms. Two or three yeomen farmers were the aristocracy, and at least a third of the households consisted of agricultural labourers. In the seventeenth century, the gap between rich and poor widened. Large farms increased in size and decreased in number, while the medium and small farms dwindled in number, and the proportion of landless labourers increased. The explanation for these developments involves short and long-term factors. Profits from grain growing were declining and so created problems for the small peasant. Corn had to be produced more efficiently if it was to pay in the competitive conditions of the seventeenth-century European grain market, and larger farm units could use labour and tools more effe war damage and taxation during the Civil War and Interregnum (1642 - 60) drove some small farmers off the land and gave landlowners their opportunity to enclose, reorganize, and create larger farming units. By this time, landowners, in any case, were inclined to plan in advance for such a reorganization, even if only as a long-term objective; enclosure had come to be recognized as inevitable in the end. They then seized their opportunity when farms were given up or tenants died without heirs.

These trends led directly to the situation graphically described by William Cobbett in the early nineteenth century when he travelled in downland country (in Kent). There he saw "barns, I should think, 200 feet long; ricks of enormous size and most numerous". But alongside these he also saw "the labourers' houses... beggarly in the extreme... Invariably I have observed that the richer the soil..., the more purely a corn country, the more miserable the labourers. The cause is this, the great, the big bull frog grasps all"[3]. The roots mly roots of this situation lay fir in the changes in progress in the seventeenth century.

Not all arable regions were so permanently dedicated to corn-growing as the downlands, however. In less favoured arable regions, where soils were heavier, or where lordly control was weak, and where a large community of small peasants was entrenched which could not easily be moved, alternative courses were followed. On the heavier vale soils, much arable land was converted to pasture; thereafter, those farmers with capital specialized in stock grazing and feeding, those without capital specialized in dairying. In this way some small peasants managed to retain a foothold on the land in relatively unpropitious circumstances. In peasant villages, which for various historic

[3] W. Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, Everyman edition, p. 321.

reasons had remained populous, and where land was suitable for spade cultivation (a sandy loam was ideal), small farmers turned to vegetable growing. This of course, was only successful if good town markets lay nearby.

The growth of market gardening in the seventeenth-century was spectacular around London and in some other districts of southern England. Its development affords yet another example of the resourcefulness of small peasants whenever new farming possibilities offered which suited their circumstances. Seed was cheap; the price of vegetables varied with quality, but the demand came from all classes, and so all qualities had a ready sale. Although the produce was often taken into towns like London on river barges, returning thence with plentiful supplies of manure, supplies could equally well be carried by men and women driving packhorses and selling their own produce when they arrived at the market. Some growers could make a living out of little[4].

The history of vegetable cultivation further reinforces the argument that the source of most agricultural innovations was the gentry and yeomen, from whom it spread down to the poorer peasant classes. In this case, events followed a more devious course than in the case of tobacco. Vegetable growing for the market was stimulated in the later sixteenth century in two ways: (I) middle class immigrants from Holland and France started market gardens on the lines that were already familiar to them in their homelands, (II) at the same time, the English gentry were acquiring a taste for, and an interest in vegetables and fruit through their travels in Holland and France. Innumerable different varieties of lettuce and cabbage were gradually made available in England to suit their increasingly refined tastes. Seedsmen came into existence in London, sending seed to many parts of the country, and peasant gardeners seized the chance to sell vegetables at the back doors of gentlemen's London residences. Covent Garden, the main vegetable and fruit market in London, thus came into existence alongside the elegant houses of the nobility in the Strand. Gardeners, moreover, quickly began to experiment with other crops that required garden cultivation. Madder, a dyestuff, that proved so profitable to Dutch growers, was tried in English market gardens. Canary seed became another new and lucrative crop after Dutch immigrants introduced the idea of keeping caged birds as pets.

As farming systems became more specialized, the interdependence of regions was intensified. The food market drew more and more customers, and its efficiency improved. Not surprisingly, the seventeenth century is the age of

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[4] J. Thirsk, *Seventeenth-century Agriculture*..., op. cit., pp. 163 - 4. Historians are showing considerable interest nowadays in the history of market gardening and the seed trade. See, for example, R. Webber, *The Early Horticulturalists*; J. Harvey, *Early Gradening Catalogues* (1972); J. Harvey, *Early Horticultural Catalogues* (1973).

river improvements, for grain, fruit, and vegetables were frequently transported by river, if they did not travel by coastal vessel. Much food also travelled by road, especially animals on the hoof, but the seasonal pattern of livestock, dairy, and vegetable production required most journeys to be undertaken in the fine weather between spring and autumn when the roads were dry and hard. Transporters of such goods did not complain at this time about poor road conditions.

The market was sufficiently well organized by the seventeenth-century to remove all fears of grain shortage after the early 1630's. In bad years grain always reached norther England in sufficient quantity from the south by coastal transport, or from Poland. Cheese and butter reached London from almost every dairying region in the country, including Cheshire in the north-west Midlands. By 1730 supplies were even being shipped from Northumberland on the Scottish border. Young cattle were driven in their hundreds from Scotland and Wales to southern and eastern England for fattennig, and until the Irish Cattle Act in 1666 thousands were brought from Ireland. All regions of the country were thus caught up in an ascending spiral of economic activity even though they were not all equally deeply involved in the market.

Population growth undoubtedly accelerated these developments, though the rate of population increase of the sixteenth-century tailed away in the seventeenth — in some areas by the 1620's, in others in the mid 1640's. But throughout the sixteenth and until the second half of the seventeenth century population pressure set in motion a considerable movement of people from the lighter warm-soiled uplands and from the clay vales — the centres of oldest cultivation and largest populations — into the fens, forests, moorlands and marshlands, where land, though poor in quality, was nevertheless plentiful. Here landless men gained a foothold, and by using their common rights of pasture, and exploiting the other natural resources of pastoral country, minerals such as coal, iron, and lead, the timber of the forests, fish and fowl, reed and willow in the fens, they had a number of alternative means of getting a living. Society in pastoral country was relatively free, for very few communities had a lord living on their doorstep, and supervision by a steward was inefficient and desultory. Many new squatters' settlements were set up at this time or old ones enlarged[5].

Some newcomers in pastoral country set to work with a will to drain land, experiment with new crop rotations, and improve grasslands. But the growth of population in these pastoral regions also stimulated the growth of industries. These had long served as occasional occupations to supply limited local needs. Coalmining, lead-smelting, iron-mining, metal-working, stocking-knitting,

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[5] J. Thirsk (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, vol. IV, 1500 - 1640, pp. 8 - 15, chapt. VII, passim.

cloth weaving, wood-turning, pottery manufacture all became important by-employments of pasture farmers, who thus had two sources of livelihood. The tools of these trades were simple, workshops were often sheds beside the house. The manufactured goods were not of high quality craftmanship, but were rather serviceable necessities in every household. They served a mass market, and their producers did not have to fear that a change of fashion, which so bedevilled the trade in quality goods for the well-to-do, would suddenly destroy their living.

Mass produced goods did not mean, however, that the products of domestic industries were uniform. Types and patterns varied greatly, but the range of choice was securely based in practical needs. Many different kinds of nails, for example, were made by the nailers of south Staffordshire, but they catered for different types of carpentry work. Different patterns of scythe were made around Sheffield: the East Yorkshire scythe was different from the Scottish scythe. The Sheffield edge tool makers supplied all regional styles and thus had a broad-based market for their wares[6].

The success of this varied industrial activity, carried on on a simple domestic basis, can only be described in very general terms in this paper. In fact, each industry had its own chronology of development, which deserves separate investigation. But taken altogether, their great strength in the early phase of their development was that they produced goods that were cheap; and were even competitive in price abroad. Since they were essential household wares and not luxuries, a mass demand was assured. In the early eighteenth century, these industries developed further and a qualitative change took place. Their wares became more highly differentiated in quality and price. The craftsmen became differentiated, and some were divorced from the land. Some specialized in goods for particular markets, or particular classes of purchasers, and became correspondingly vulnerable in periods of trade depression. The fine broadcloth industry of the west of England had already passed through this phase of development long before the seventeenth century; its consequences were reflected in the poverty of landless cloth weavers in towns and industrial villages whenever a sharp trade depression or a sudden diplomatic crisis abruptly stopped sales. This more complex structure developed eventually in all branches of industry. But in the early commercial phase of many rural industries in the seventeenth century they produced mass goods to suit mass needs, they had a resilience, not to say ebullient strength, which conferred a

[6] D. Hey, *A Dual Economy in South Yorkshire*, Agricultural History Review, XVII, II, 1969; D. Hey, *The Rural Metalworkers of the Sheffield Region. A Study of Rural Industry before the Industrial Revolution*, Leicester University Press, Occasional Paper, 2nd Series, no. 5, 1972; M. Rowlands, *Industry and Social Change in Staffordshire, 1660 - 1760*, Lichfield and South Staffordshire Archaeological and Historical Society, IX, 1967 - 8, pp. 37 - 58.

modest prosperity on their workers. Peasant-craftsmen had a dual source of livelihood, in food from the land, and cash from their industrial occupation. They served faithful and far from finicky customers who were men of the same class, at home and abroad. The rising value of real wages in the second half of the seventeenth century put extra cash for these essential goods into their clients' purses.

Peasant-workers in pastoral regions enjoyed a life of modest comfort in the second half of the seventeenth century, so long as agriculture and industry were held in equilibrium. Wealth was more evenly distributed in their communities than in arable areas: there were fewer rich and fewer poor. A sturdy independence infused their lives. They had never known close supervision by a lord but had always had to fend for themselves. New economic conditions in the seventeenth century created highly favourable conditions for the expansion of both pastoral and industrial activities. In the next century, of course, the success of rural industries tilted the balance of the economy towards further industrialization, and in many areas destroyed its agricultural base. But the old "dual economy" died hard. Domestic textile workers put up a long and bitter struggle against absorption into towns and factories. The leadminers of the northern Pennines still maintained their small holdings alongside their mining activities into the second half of the nineteenth century. A relic of these seventeenth-century traditions still survives in the allotments which industrial workers continue to keep in the larger towns for growing vegetables[7].

I have quoted elsewhere a graphic description by Daniel Defoe of the life of one peasant-worker in north Derbyshire in the early eighteenth century — a lead miner with a plot of barley land at his door, a cow, and some pigs grazing nearby. The family lived in a cave, and Defoe, the well-to-do gentleman from London, was horrified to discover it. But on inspecting their living quarters and noting the earthenware, pewter, and brass on the shelves, and the flitch of bacon in the roof, he admitted that they lived "very pleasantly, the children looked plump, and fat, ruddy, and wholesome". The final comment on this type of economy may be left to William Cobbett, who saw developments a century later when the corn country had reduced its labourers to squalid poverty and hopelessness, and the contrast between it and the pastoral regions was further sharpened. In the Forest of Dean (an iron mining area as well as a forest) he observed, "their cottages are very neat, and the people look hearty and well, just as they do round the forests in Hampshire. Every cottage has a pig or two. These graze in the forest and in the fall eat acorns and beechnuts

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[7] C. J. Hunt, *The Lead Miners of the Northern Pennines in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (1970). See also D. Bythell, *The Handloom Weavers. A study in the English Cotton Industry during the Industrial Revolution*, 1969.

and the seed of the ash. Some of these foresters keep cows and all of them have bits of ground cribbed of course at different times from the forest". His final summing up could stand equally well for conditions in the seventeenth century. "They invariably do best in the woodland and forest and wild countries. Where the almighty grasper has all under his eye they get but little"[8].

[8] J. Thirsk, *Seventeenth-century Agriculture*..., op. cit., p. 175; W. Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, pp. 34, 224.