



The extent and impact of the 1940 and 1941 “plough-up” campaigns on farming across the South Downs, England



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ABSTRACT

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The decades around World War II are considered a turning point in the fortunes of British agriculture that witnessed significant change in its structure and operation. The exigencies of World War II prompted the British government to initiate a National Farm Survey (NFS) of all farmers with over 5 acres (2.03 ha) of land in 1941–1943 in conjunction with the plough-up campaign and food rationing in order to avoid food shortages. The NFS became available to researchers through the National Archives in the mid-1990s and is unparalleled as a national source of spatial and socio-economic data about individual farms. It comprises two main interrelated documentary data sets: the 1941 June Agricultural Census Returns; and the Primary Record detailing the condition of the holding and the farmer. The latter also includes information about the plough-up campaigns of 1940 and 1941 and identifies the fields destined to be brought into crop production. Additionally the NFS includes large scale Ordnance Survey topographic maps annotated with farm boundaries.

This paper, linked to a larger project relating to farm occupancy in the pre- and post-World War II decades, focuses on the plough-up campaign data in the NFS for a statistical population of over 500 farms in a group of contiguous parishes stretching across the South Downs, in south-east England. It explores the extent of the wartime plough-up and its potential impact on landscape change in the subsequent peacetime decades. It thereby contributes to our understanding of the impact of the Second World War on farming and the agricultural landscape in mid-twentieth century England.

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1. Introduction

Cyclical growth and decline in British agriculture during the closing decades of the 19th century and opening decades of the 20th century was punctuated by two periods of upheaval associated with the First and Second World Wars. In relation to agriculture, from the onset of hostilities the First World War precipitated governmental intervention in the industry, for example there was a determination to stockpile reserves of wheat and a commitment to control imports. County War Agricultural Committees (CWACs) were established under the overall control and guidance of the Board of Agriculture with the aim of increasing food production at the local scale. The power and potential influence of these committees was augmented in 1917 when the word “Executive” was inserted (County War Agricultural Executive Committees (CWAECs)), which signified their role as decision making bodies

Abbreviations: NFS, National Farm Survey; CWAEC, County War Agricultural Executive Committee; AC, Agricultural Census; PR, Primary Record.

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striving towards achieving increased food production. Lord Ernle, who was President of the Board of Agriculture, described the purpose of these Committees as “the improvement and extension of arable cultivation, with spade as well as plough; decentralization; and drastic powers of compulsion which could only be justifiable or tolerable in a war emergency” (Ernle, 1925: 107). This extension of the CWAEC’s powers was associated with the introduction of a plough-up campaign, also in 1917, with the specific aim of expanding domestic production of staple foods, especially wheat and potatoes. Grassland sown since 1875 was the main target of this campaign and farmers’ cooperation was sought in ploughing-up such land for re-sowing with selected crops, although compulsory powers were held in reserve should these prove necessary. The area under cultivation in England and Wales increased by 5.8 per cent in 1917 and 21.3 per cent in 1918 (Crowe, 2007: 209) and by the end of the war the area of tillage in the UK had risen by 18 per cent of the pre-war total to 5.01 million ha (12.36 million acres) (Dewey, 1997: 36). These gains can largely be attributed to the work of the CWAECs.

Any benefits to farmers and the country arising from this war time drive to increase output were dissipated in the early years

after the armistice and the interwar period has typically been characterised as a time of disinvestment in agriculture when marginal land in upland and lowland regions was withdrawn from production (Hallam, 1983). The traditional view of British agriculture during the interwar years, promulgated during the period in various quarters as well as in subsequent economic and social historiographies was that the *laissez-faire* policy prevailing since 1870 (Harkness, 1941) resumed following a brief flirtation with a more interventionist support for the industry in the immediate aftermath of WWI (Brassley, 2006). Lord Addison aptly summarised the contemporary view by his assertion that “millions of acres of land have passed out of active cultivation” (Addison, 1939: 14). However, the revisionist interpretation of the social and economic history of interwar Britain that emerged during the closing decade of the 20th century, having initially made scant reference to farming, has now produced a more nuanced account of the British countryside between the wars (Perren, 1995; Martin, 2000; Wilt, 2001), which contrasts with Mingay’s (1990: 220) view that “the 1930s policy of intervention ... was only marginally successful”, The period is now less commonly viewed as one of unalloyed decline and more as nurturing in different ways the “green shoots” of regeneration and post-WWII renewal. In respect of interwar agricultural history Howkins (2006: 22–23) argued “it seem (sic) possible to make a crude division, especially in the arable areas, although not only here, about 1932. Before that date farming was certainly in decline; after that date it showed signs of recovery.”

Howkins (2006: 22) argued that “growth of white-collar employment, commuting and the “suburb” ... changed the face of rural England” in the 1930s and was associated with relatively uncontrolled urban expansion and increasing pressure to build over the countryside (Taylor et al., 2010). This included the infamous ribbon development along main arterial roads that prompted the 1935 *Ribbon Development Act* as well as general encroachment over agricultural land as suburban growth around towns and cities addressed a pent up demand for new housing and provided much needed growth in the economy (see for example Hall, 1992). These and other related developments, including an emerging view that urban growth should be managed and planned, highlighted the lack of definitive land use data and maps for the country as a whole. With the benefit of hindsight Stamp reflected, once comprehensive Town and Country Planning legislation had been enacted in 1947, that “one of the objects of the Land Utilisation Survey [was] to provide at least some of these essential basic data” (Stamp, 1964: 433).

The role of the CWAECs had lapsed during the interwar years but they were revived between 1936 and 1938 in anticipation of the onset of a second round of hostilities. Under the Defence Regulations they were given extensive powers to “take possession of land, requisition property, enter upon and inspect land, control the use of agricultural land and direct the cultivation of agricultural land.” (Short et al., 2000, p30). The decline in food imports that resulted from German attacks on transatlantic shipping from September 1939 as well as the parlous state into which domestic food production was felt to have fallen by the end of the 1930s, although noting this view has been contested, led to legislation that enhanced the role of the CWAECs in the administration of British agriculture and tasked them with collecting data on the condition of British farming that turned into the 1941–43 National Farm Survey. Six months before the start of the Second World War (WWII) in April 1939 the Agriculture Development Act (Ministry of Agriculture, 1939) included the provision to pay £2 per acre (£2 per 0.405 ha) to farmers who ploughed-up permanent grass (land under grass for at least seven years) and who re-seeded or replanted it with wheat, oats, barely, rye, mixed corn or potatoes. The CWAECs were given a plough-up quota “which broadly equated

to 10% of the area of permanent grass” (Rawding, 2008: 2; see also Murray, 1955; Short et al., 2000). Short et al. (2000: 208) discussed variations in which CWAEC surveyors completed the NFS forms, but in essence there were three plough-up campaigns that identified fields in 1939, 1940 and 1941 for ploughing and re-sowing with crops that would be harvested in 1940, 1941 and 1942 respectively and at their conclusion the majority of suitable land had been replanted in this way. These plough-up campaigns respectively added 1.72, 0.61 and 0.46 million hectares to the area of tilled land (Short et al., 2000). Land selected for inclusion in the plough-up campaigns is likely to have included some of the marginal areas (fens, hills and commons) from which farmers had withdrawn by the 1930s and may also be associated with declining yields on land under continuous cropping.

The NFS was seen as providing information that would constitute one of the key resources in the CWAEC’s task of administering the plough-up campaigns and thereby increasing food production. Although the initial “pilot survey” in 1940 was only partial and in some respects yielded contradictory information, the imperative of increasing production was of such strategic importance in the early stages of the war when a German invasion was considered a very real possibility that the government embarked upon the full-scale National Farm Survey in 1941 and for the most part it had been completed by the end of 1943. The annual Agricultural Census that had operated since 1866 provided data on the areas of different crops and agricultural land use, the numbers of livestock and supplementary forms yielded counts of the numbers of selected items of machinery, but there was no form of qualitative assessment of the farmer or the farm, especially in respect of such matters as the farmer’s age, investment record and inclination to improve soil quality through fertilisation or drainage. Farms and farmers with combinations of these characteristics might be considered indicative of a more enlightened approach to farming and these might also be more receptive to exhortations to plough-up grassland and to re-sow or plant the land to increase production. A standardised form was devised to collect this type of information from all holdings above 5 acres (2.03 ha) between 1941 and 1943. The first summary results were not published until 1946 (Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 1946), although the NFS documents held in the CWAEC offices were key sources of information for administering the plough-up and directing the agricultural industry during the war years. The impact of the actions taken using the information assembled by the NFS did not end after the war and Short (2007: 219) argues that “the effects, and reactions to” the plough-up of grassland “lasted into the twenty-first century”.

This paper draws on research carried out in a series of linked projects over the last 30 years that as a whole has sought to explore the patterns and processes of agricultural restructuring and landscape change in south-east England during the 20th century. The specific focus of this paper is a group of 78 parishes stretching across the South Downs in the counties of East and West Sussex (Fig. 1) excluding Lewes. Since the Middle Ages farming on the South Downs with their relatively free draining soils of limited fertility was characterised by a mutually supportive system of sheep rearing and corn: sheep grazed on grass slopes were kept overnight on lower fields thus helping to fertilise areas that were destined for cereal cropping. This system had produced by the mid-19th century the sheep and cereals farming region identified by Short (1999), but by the start of the 20th century its profitability had reduced with the arrival of artificial fertilisers and cheap imports of sheep products. During the post-WWII decades increased governmental direction of agriculture through interventionist policies, initially in reaction to wartime food shortages and subsequently capitalising on technological developments, included a push towards greater self-sufficiency in temperate arable crops (see

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