



**AgEcon** SEARCH  
RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURAL & APPLIED ECONOMICS

*The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library*

**This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.**

**Help ensure our sustainability.**

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search

<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>

[aesearch@umn.edu](mailto:aesearch@umn.edu)

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

*No endorsement of AgEcon Search or its fundraising activities by the author(s) of the following work or their employer(s) is intended or implied.*

**INTERNATIONAL  
JOURNAL OF  
AGRARIAN AFFAIRS**

Vol. I, No. 4, May 1952

**The Consolidation of  
Farms in Six Countries  
of Western Europe**



Price 5s. 0d. net

**OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS**  
**LONDON: GEOFFREY CUMBERLEGE**

By K. SKOVGAARD

*The Royal Veterinary and Agricultural College of Copenhagen*

## CONSOLIDATION OF AGRICULTURAL LAND IN DENMARK

**A**LTHOUGH the problem of consolidation of agricultural land does exist in Denmark, it is far from being of the same economic and social magnitude as in many other countries. This is due to historical development, to the laws and traditions of the country, and to the early recognition by the farmers themselves of the great value of well-consolidated farms.

In the eighteenth century feudalistic conditions prevailed, and the agricultural land was predominantly divided into estates owned by big landlords and to a less extent by the Crown, while only a small percentage of the land was in the hands of freehold farmers. Each estate comprised one or more manor farms and a number of tenant farms lying closely together in villages. Of the total acreage used for agriculture, that cultivated by the large manor farms never exceeded 15 per cent., the tenants occupied approximately 80 per cent., and possibly 5 per cent. was freehold. The land utilized by the tenants was divided into three distinct parts, (a) small enclosed home fields, (b) cultivated fields surrounding the village, and (c) far-lying commons providing common hay land and pasture. Each tenant had his cultivated land distributed in numerous strips all over the village fields necessitating the open-field system of farming. To some extent the manorial land was consolidated and enclosed, but often it was partly or even totally a part of the village fields.

This system of farming aroused much discontent at an early date as it was readily recognized to be exceedingly inefficient besides barring the way to progress, and as early as the middle of the eighteenth century some public reforms were introduced, though they touched only lightly the essential problems of consolidation, and never led to real improvement. The initiative taken by individual progressive landlords was of more influence. From 1760 onwards they consolidated the farms on their estates in a thorough and often model way, and as those early reforms rapidly proved themselves profitable to landlords and tenants alike, they supported the arguments in favour of more general consolidation.

The scope of this early privately initiated consolidation was limited,

however, for several reasons. Firstly, it was exceptional for a single landlord to control exclusively all the rights over the land of the village. As a general rule the property rights inside the individual village, as well as among the neighbouring villages, were very much entangled, a fact which made it difficult or impossible to agree voluntarily on consolidations. Secondly, it was problematical whether in the last resort it was the landlord or the tenant who had to pay the costs of consolidation, seeing that the tenants came to acquire fairly extensive protection and fixity of tenure.

Fortunately enough, the existence of these difficulties necessitated public initiative, and opened the opportunity for the government to give a lead in the matter and to influence the process of consolidation in a wholesome and rational way. This opportunity was soon to be fully utilized as in 1781 a law was passed which cleared up all the points at issue and fixed a set of rules governing the consolidation process. This law, as amended in 1793, was a thoroughly well thought out document, radical if anything, but fully ensuring a square deal to all interested parties, and it expedited the process in a most surprising way.

The law was built on the examples set by the early private projects and the results which they had achieved. In principle, the whole territory of the village was considered as a unity, which meant that home fields, village fields, and commons were thrown together, disregarding all established rights of cultivation or even of ownership. Following a thorough survey and assessment, the whole territory was then divided into a number of blocks corresponding with the number of farms or property rights. The acreages of the blocks were fixed according to the quality of the land to ensure equality of opportunity, and for this reason the blocks laid out on former commons or uncultivated land were given larger acreages than those laid out on the old cultivated fields close to the village. When the division had taken place, the blocks were distributed among the tenants, very often by drawing lots. The final, and usually the most painful, step was the removal from the villages of the farm buildings of those farms which had been given off-lying blocks, a principal objective being to locate the farmsteads on the land to which they belonged.

It is easily understood that the reform meant a revolution to the countryside and to the farm population, as it did away with most of the traditional mode of farming and the customary social life. It is not very surprising that the tenants often opposed the reform pas-

sionately, seeing that it forced quite a number of them to move out, pioneer fashion, into the open deserts of the old commons, sacrificing the shelter of the village, the amenities of village life, and the feeling of mutual security that they engendered. These obstacles were rapidly overcome, however, as experience convinced the tenants of the value of consolidation; soon, indeed, the tenants themselves often took the initiative, and induced their landlords to consolidate their properties.

According to the Consolidation Act any one landowner in a village had the right to have his land consolidated on request, even if the other owners, or the owners of the majority rights, were opposed to it or were disinterested in it. Whenever such a request was made a complete consolidation plan had to be worked out so as, in the words of the Act, 'not to prejudice a good, final consolidation'. Irrespective of the numbers of interested and disinterested parties, all property had to pay the costs *pro rata*.

Consolidation gained impetus year by year from 1793 onwards, being greatly stimulated by the combined effects of increasing productivity, decreasing costs of operation, and the rapidly rising prices during the Napoleonic wars, which made it possible for an extremely poor rural population to bear the comparatively heavy investments involved. Within twenty years the vast majority of villages and estates had been consolidated, and by 1835 only 1 per cent. were unaffected.

In a great part of the country consolidation was carried out strictly in accordance with the simple principle laid down in the Act, but quite often compromises were made for different reasons. Whenever this happened it was proved by experience that improving a consolidation which was inferior to start with was at best a very slow and laborious process, even though the farmers might recognize the great value of well laid-out farms. This very fact explains why a consolidation problem still exists in certain parts of the country, as is especially the case in southern Jutland. In that province the land was consolidated very much on the same lines as were followed in north-western Europe; all the farms were left in the villages and each farm had its land consolidated into a varying number of plots distributed all over the village territory. And today there are added the effects of development all over the country—the building of roads and paths, railroad constructions, regulation of water-courses, &c., which very often have interfered with, or damaged, good farm layouts. To remedy, or anyway to improve, the resulting difficulties, a new Consolidation Act has been passed recently. It is by no means so radical as the Act of

1793. Its primary purpose is to organize reconsolidation schemes by negotiation, though it opens the door to compulsion whenever the initiative of a majority of landowners is paralysed by a minority. The government subsidizes the process by paying the planning and negotiation costs, while the farmers themselves have to pay the costs of removal of buildings, &c. Much interest is taken in the matter as labour costs have increased, and it is the even higher cost of building that often prevents the removal of farmsteads to more convenient locations. In this respect conditions have entirely changed since the early days of consolidation in the eighteenth century.

On the other hand, the early recognition by the farmers themselves of the importance of consolidation, and the breaking down of the village mentality has led to much improvement. When farm buildings became obsolete or when they were burnt down, the opportunity would often be taken to remove a farmstead to a convenient site on the land, and, by bargaining, many an improvement of farm boundaries has taken place. Finally, whenever new farms were established by parcelling out barren land, and bringing it into cultivation, the new farms had their land completely consolidated.

The following figures may give some idea of the problem in Denmark. In 1805 the number of agricultural holdings, excluding manor farms, in the northern parts of the country, totalled 55,300 farms and 60,000 smallholdings, altogether 115,300 holdings. In 1936 the number was 186,500, an increase of 71,200, the consolidation of most of them being complete and satisfactory. The same holds true for most of the smallholdings and for a majority of the farms which existed in 1805. Even so, it may be guessed that some improvement by consolidation, if not some essential consolidation, might be effected on so many as 20,000 of the holdings existing today, while there must be added to this figure a fairly large percentage of the 14,300 holdings in southern Jutland. On the other hand, consolidation on the island of Bornholm is excellent.

If consolidation is a problem in itself, the next problem is to maintain a good farm layout once it is established. This amounts to preventing the undue splitting-up of consolidated farms of all sizes, and in this respect no problem exists in Denmark except for the intervention of such public measures as may affect land. This statement is justified because of the law pertaining to division of land, to rights of property in land, to the maintenance of agricultural holdings, &c., and because of the traditions and ideas of the people concerning land.

From time immemorial it has been a rule that only one heir takes over a farm, a rule which has been maintained throughout and kept alive, even when freehold was the rare exception, and renewed when freehold increased again and became the predominating form of tenure. In most parts of the country the eldest son inherited the farm but in some the youngest had this privilege. Nowadays the heir is chosen from the point of view of convenience, and quite often a daughter and son-in-law take the farm when the old people choose to live with the young family. It never happened in other days, nor does it now, that the land is divided among the heirs, even though their rights of inheritance may be equal. When none of the children is able to take the farm, or does not wish to, the farm is sold. This tradition is maintained by existing laws which make the dividing or parcelling out of land an official act which, since 1793, has to be approved by the authorities. Each parcel must be surveyed and mapped, and duly registered with the local judge, before it can become a new and independent holding.

It should be added, however, that the traditions and rules of law concerning consolidation have been supported by the fact that the economic development of the country has taken place in such a way that no acute pressure of population on the land has endangered the existing consolidation.

As a result of comprehensive agricultural reforms, the rural population increased rapidly from 1800 onwards and the parcelling out and establishment of cottage holdings took place on a rather extensive scale, but the increase of population was largely, even if not quite satisfactorily, provided for by technical improvements in agricultural production which demanded more labour. From the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the pressure of population eased off, as emigration overseas and the growing city trades absorbed the expanding rural population. After 1880 the rural population remained almost stationary for decades, and for the last twenty years it has decreased considerably.

The development of a consolidation policy at an early date was a most fortunate factor in Danish agriculture. The rights of property in land at that time were concentrated in few hands, thus making it possible to carry out a rational consolidation without conflicting with the sentiments of the proper tillers of the soil, the tenants. This opportunity was utilized in a thoroughly comprehensive way and it was not long before all the interested parties, landlords, tenants, and

society at large, came to appreciate its merits. It established a tradition which gave Danish agriculture a very great advantage. Although consolidation is still far from ideal, it is at least as good as that in any other European country, and recognizing the advantages it brings, it is a continual endeavour of the public authorities, as of the farmers themselves, to pursue the policy whenever opportunity offers.