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Centre for Agricultural Strategy

83-613

# Smallfarming and the Rural Community

Edited by  
BJ Marshall & RB Tranter

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1982

CAS Paper 11      April 1982

Marshall, B J & Tranter, R B (Eds) (1982) *Smallfarming and the Rural Community*. CAS Paper 11. Reading: Centre for Agricultural Strategy.

# A living countryside

Hew Watt

## INTRODUCTION

Five thousand years ago there was room for everyone in the countryside. We did not need field boundaries, just territorial ones such as rivers and hills. Occasionally, when we were particularly hungry, we would cross these to steal and pillage from other people's productive efforts.

Settlements continued to increase and it was only the coming of enclosures that created fields as we know them and then it was usually to protect crops and animals from the ravages of others. Villages developed a unique character, with their particular shape and size evolving to meet the needs of the community, not the planners. Those, then, were the days of true economics when people had to be self-supporting wasting nothing; if they weren't they just disappeared as a community.

So villages rose and fell according to the efficiency and inventiveness of their inhabitants whilst coping with the elements and ravages of disease. So much then for our origins.

## CURRENT PROBLEMS

The Industrial Revolution led to larger and larger manufacturing plants, manned by people who had left the countryside. This left us eventually with less than 3% of the population actively engaged in agriculture and perhaps 8-10% relying on it. This process of replacing farm labour with bought-in energy has gone farther in the UK than in any other country in the world.

During this process farmers have often been accused, particularly by urban people, of interfering with the natural order of things, in both crop and animal life. Yet the medical profession does just this in alleviating pain and promoting healing and who would have it otherwise. Three hundred years ago the 'Black Death' was endemic and halved our population, so don't let us crave for a return to 'the good old days' when nature was left to take its course.

It is only when man battles against nature that he raises himself above the level of the animal kingdom and certainly if we as farmers had not gone against nature, then our urban friends' deep-freezes would not be full to overflowing with food. It is by taking direct deliberate action against the natural order of things that civilisation, as we know it, was created.

The question for us today is: 'Are we on the path of progress or decay?' First and foremost we should aim to create and sustain a sound and stable rural society by reversing the policy of land clearances that have occurred since the Industrial Revolution by helping the greatest possible number of new entrants into both agriculture and rural industries. Other European countries have taken a much more positive line to retain viable rural populations than ourselves with many more restrictions on who can own and farm the land. Remember people are still the most important crop in the countryside, but for several decades successive Governments in the UK have ignored what has been happening, endeavouring to obtain and retain the urban vote by promising more and more of everything to everybody from finite resources.

The disaster of the pursuit of confrontation in Party Politics has brought us from a leading country in Europe and the world to a divisive and angry society. If our party politicians were honest with us they would be telling us that the golden age of material growth of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s is definitely over and suggesting that growth rates are a thing of the past; but this has never been a vote-catcher. Modern industrialised development with its large plants and a fully mechanised agriculture now has no answer to our present day problems. It has excluded most of our rural population from the benefits of improved agriculture, forcing them to work in cities, where now a capital and energy intensive industry is failing to provide employment.

So the answer is not still higher technology with micro-chips etc, but the question should be 'Technology for what?', remembering technology must serve people as they are the most important crop. The test of 'appropriate' technology for us should now be 'Does it create jobs and income for people where they live? Can it use local materials and locally designed tools? Is it possible gradually to return from a concentration of huge outputs in one or two centres requiring tremendous transport networks to local production serving local needs?' Remember there is more to technology than just machines, for technology shapes the political,

economic and social structure of a country. It can so often just make the rich richer and the poor poorer. However, if 'appropriate' technology is properly used it can give a better and fuller life for all though it means changing to a much simpler life, working hard and wasting nothing.

In the past growth in agricultural productivity has been based on cheap imported energy replacing people. To continue this path by further enlarging farm units could destroy the last remnants of our rural communities with villages becoming only lodging houses for commuters. Bryan Carr, in his Nuffield Scholarship report, showed that whilst in 1945 there were 32 viable farms in his own parish of Forton, Lancashire, today only 7 remain. This disastrous change has, almost without exception, been repeated nationwide.

As the Northfield Report pointed out, farmers have often been our own worst enemies by financing amalgamation of farms from loans secured on the inflated value of agricultural land. Land has been the only asset that has kept pace with inflation with agricultural land rising from £500 per ha in 1968 to nearly £5000 per ha in 1979.

Successive Governments are also partly responsible for they have printed and borrowed money instead of using it to refurbish our manufacturing industry. They also have allowed it to be funnelled into land and property, leading to spiralling prices. Jim Slater summed the whole situation up most succinctly when, discussing his takeovers, he said he was concerned with making money, not making things!

We must reverse this inflationary spiral which has made land worth more in terms of capital gain than in its productive use. Free market philosophy can only work where, as demand increases, more of a product can be manufactured to meet that demand; with land this is just not possible. The income of pension funds was £9 billion in 1980 and the Wilson Committee forecast it to be £25 billion in 1985; thus their problem will be where to invest, as already they own two-thirds of all UK equities. Therefore, land is bound to attract an ever increasing amount of their funds.

## SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS

So much for our problems; now for my own solutions to bring life back to the countryside.

Government has already issued guidelines to Planning Authorities recommending relaxing of controls in rural communities, thus enabling redundant farm buildings to be brought back into useful and valuable life. I would take this much further by positively encouraging rural light industry on virgin sites thus offering a much wider job mix in the countryside.

In agriculture success should be measured not by how few people we need to

farm more and more land, but how many people can this land support? Who owns and farms the land in the future is the key to a return to a living countryside. The CLA and NFU (both of which I am a member) have no solutions to these problems as they have to be all things to all people. But you cannot win a football match by playing for both sides. The recent AGM of the NFU showed how easy it is to get out of touch with the grass roots of an industry even on such an important matter as tenancy legislation and when the largest farmers are your largest subscribers, proposals for change in farm size are unlikely.

I am against statutory control of farm size due to the huge bureaucracy required to administer it and the lawyers' paradise created to avoid it.

Our best hope for providing the bottom rung of the ladder for new entrants to agriculture is to create a viable landlord/tenant system. To encourage this I would phase out all taxation reliefs and production grants to those farming over 400 ha of lowland and then limit them only to people earning 75% of their income from the production of food or timber or in letting land.

Limiting production grants is an emotive subject but it is as well to look at what has happened in the past to such taxpayers' money. One of our largest dairy units recently erected received tens of thousands of pounds of grant aid and today stands empty. Government recognising this, now limits grant aid to £100 000 in any one application, but let them be much bolder and limit all grants to those obtaining 75% of their income from the production of food and timber. The principle of the 'working farmer' has already been accepted by the Treasury, so its enlargement would be no change of principle. To continue fiscal relief and production grants to those farming over 400 ha of lowland, be they individual or Pension Funds, just encourages further farm amalgamations and sounds the death knell to new entrants by inflating land prices still further. As land loses its attraction as a hedge against inflation and values fall more in line with its productive use, absentee owner-occupiers will tend to disappear and opportunities for new entrants increase.

## CONCLUSION

Agriculture requires personal involvement and we need to encourage the entrepreneur into farming; size of unit alone is no guarantee of success. Efficiency, like happiness, has many definitions, so I can only expound my own. The foundation of an efficient farm is a stable family unit, fed and clothed to a minimum standard that will provide good health, plus children for the future. Efficient farming systems should rely less on finite resources and more on renewable ones. We should be able to pay our debtors as promised, and at the same time raise a family that accepts its duties and obligations to others as well as providing for themselves — achieve this and then I think you can call yourself efficient.

Civilisation as we know it came about due to the efforts of people in developing knowledge and wisdom. First we had feudalism with a large part of the crop going to the landlord; then followed capitalism which often developed into a dishonest way of distributing wealth; then came socialism which aims at honestly dividing poverty. We must develop and hold onto capitalism but capitalism with a social conscience. We must hold onto ownership plus free enterprise and aim to produce as cheaply as possible without loss of human dignity; efficiency in fact with compassion.

We must aim to get more people living and working in the countryside. Remember that there is no real wealth but life itself.