

Before Political Economy: Debate over Grain Markets, Dearth and Pauperism in England, 1794-96

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Abstract: During the 1790s Britain experienced a series of poor harvests which, given an expanding population and wartime disruption to the European grain trade, resulted in sudden and rapid increases in the domestic price of wheat. In modern discussion of Corn and Poor Laws the severity of these fluctuations has been obscured by the use of annual average grain prices, despite weekly county prices being available from 1771 as published in the *London Gazette*. We highlight the uncertainties of grain prices during the period 1794-96, drawing upon extensive contemporary discussion published in the *Annals of Agriculture* of the problems arising from rapid fluctuations in the price of wheat. Our purpose is to demonstrate that the tropes usually today associated with the Corn and Poor Laws – pauperism, a clash between merchant, manufacturing and landlord interests, population and impoverishment – are absent from discussion during this period. A doctrinaire “political economy” would develop in the early 1800s, but did not yet exist. Policy argument drew upon casuistic reasoning from circumstance and past experience. We also show that this approach undermines any idea that Edmund Burke’s *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* is in some way connected to “political economy”.

While it has long been accepted that Britain underwent the first Industrial Revolution between the last third of the eighteenth century and the first third of the nineteenth, the processes that initiated and sustained this transformation remain today a matter of ever-more technical debate among economic historians. Arnold Toynbee’s *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution in England* (1884) originated the historiography,² adding to it the idea that this economic transformation was accompanied by an intellectual transformation: the creation of

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an English Political Economy associated primarily with David Ricardo, who “lived in the midst” of an industrial revolution,³ unlike his predecessor Adam Smith. Toynbee’s grasp of Ricardo was shaky, but as an Oxford student he would have been familiar with Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, which was a set text for Pass degree students like Toynbee.⁴ Nonetheless, he argued that it was Ricardo, not Smith, who appeared to contemporaries as “the revealer of a new gospel”, although his followers were said to be blinded to the importance of observation by their adherence to deductivism.

According to Toynbee, competition was the leading idea of Ricardo’s political economy; and this neatly links to the treatment of the industrial revolution and Ricardian political economy in the work of another significant writer, Karl Polanyi’s *Great Transformation* (1944). Like the “industrial revolution” that Toynbee put into circulation, this “great transformation”, the emergence of a market economy, remains a powerful popular myth that continues to make some sort of sense of the multiple transformations of the global economy since the later eighteenth century. Central to Polanyi’s story is what the market economy did to labour, destroying the “traditional fabric of society” and in the process creating a “free labour market” that eventually turned out to have benefits for all concerned. However, the emergence of a competitive labour market was delayed: “During the most active period of the Industrial Revolution, from 1795 to 1834, the creating of a labour market in England was prevented through the Speenhamland Law.”⁵ Named as such after a decision made by Berkshire Justices of the Peace in May 1795 to create a sliding scale of relief for the working poor according to household size, Polanyi argued that the measure pauperised workers, hindering the transition to a free labour market with the New Poor Law of 1834. Here he unwittingly repeated the mythology of the Old Poor Law advanced by the architects of the New Poor Law, Nassau Senior and Edwin Chadwick, who employed the data they had collected only to confirm their prior doctrinal beliefs. This mythology had duly become received wisdom; not until the 1960s were the flaws in this story exposed.⁶

² See Keith Tribe, *Constructing Economic Science. The Invention of a Discipline 1850-1950*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2022 pp. 200–208. The idea of an “Industrial Revolution” was first mooted by Auguste Blanqui in 1837; see Keith Tribe, “‘Industrialisation’ as a Historical Category” in his *Genealogies of Capitalism*, Macmillan, London 1981 p. 101. This usage did not catch on until very much later. William Cunningham’s *The Growth of English Industry and Commerce*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1882 was the first survey of English economic history, beginning before the Romans with the English tribes but ending as the “industrial system” “came to establish its position as a more independent factor” (p. 387) during the eighteenth century. Cunningham makes no reference to an “Industrial Revolution” in this context; instead he refers to the introduction of the spinning mule as “marking most clearly the development of the factory system.” (p. 397)

³ Arnold Toynbee, *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution in England, Popular Addresses, Notes, and Other Fragments*, Rivingtons, London 1884 p. 9.

⁴ Tribe, *Constructing Economic Science*, p. 185; Wolseley P. Emerton’s *An Analysis of Adam Smith’s Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations Pt. I*, James Thornton, Oxford 1877 was a popular student crib. It reprinted synopses of Books I and II of *Wealth of Nations* drawn from the 1821 3rd edition of Jeremiah Joyce’s *Complete Analysis; or, Abridgement of Dr. Adam Smith’s Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, originally published in 1797.

⁵ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Beacon Press, Boston 1957 p. 77.

⁶ By Mark Blaug: “The Myth of the Old Poor Law and the Making of the New”, *Journal of Economic History* Vol. 23 (1963) pp. 151-84, and “The Poor-Law Report Re-examined”, *Journal of Economic History* Vol. 24 (1964) pp. 229-45. In the second article Blaug reprocessed responses to one question in the Rural Questionnaire that had been circulated in the early 1830s. He demonstrates that the causal relationship maintained by the Commissioners in their 1834 *Report*, that cash allowances to working adults created the problem of indigence, ran together payments

The forty years between 1795 and 1834 form the space on to which arguments about Britain's industrial transformation are projected, yet for much of this period Britain was primarily an agrarian economy, with the great majority of the population living outside major cities, engaged in agriculture, small-scale manufacture and handicrafts, depending throughout the period on the same road network, rivers, canals and coastal shipping. Only in the course of the Crimean War of 1853 to 1856 did the British Army complete a transition to a rifled, muzzle-loading musket that replaced a smoothbore originating in the early eighteenth century. Charles Dickens' first novel, *Pickwick Papers*, was published in 1836, supposedly depicting events in 1827-28, but the world in which the action is placed would have been equally familiar fifty years earlier. While in the early nineteenth century a new world did begin to form within the old order, we should take care not to project the ideas and assumptions of the former prematurely on to the latter.

Polanyi was not wrong to identify poor relief as a potential wedge issue, but he was wrong to see "Speenhamland" as a turning point. This essay seeks to explain why this is so, while recognising that in the first three decades of the nineteenth century the new discourse of political economy developed arguments about wage labour, pauperism and the relationship between rents, wages and profits that sought to influence legislative action, all of which postdated "1795" both chronologically and epistemologically. Robert Malthus's *Essay on Population* (1798), his *Investigation of the Cause of the Present High Price of Provisions* (1800), Ricardo's *Essay on Profits* (1815), along with Sir Frederick Eden's *State of the Poor* (1797) – in 1795 these all lay in the future. Edmund Burke's *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* was drafted during the autumn of 1795 and it has been suggested in recent years that Burke draws here upon a contemporary discourse of political economy, creating a new link between 1795, 1815 and 1834. We will show that there is however no plausible linkage between Burke's text and what shortly afterwards became known as political economy, while such analysis as he offered also failed to engage with contemporary debate.

This essay turns away from canonical names to consider instead how this contemporary debate reflected changing agrarian market conditions, adopting the perspective of the *Annals of Agriculture*. This was a serial initiated by Arthur Young and published from 1784 to 1808, primarily aimed at diffusing agricultural knowledge but during times of dearth and high prices carrying a great deal of commentary from local contributors. In late 1795 it also included a large amount of Parliamentary material, although the relatively limited pamphlet literature of the time was never systematically reviewed.⁷ The primary context that we will work from here

to working adults and child allowances for third, fourth or fifth children. His reprocessing of responses – in fact, processing them for the first time – showed that the bulk of the payments made related to children, not working adults – "The Poor-Law Report Re-examined", p. 232. Blaug had no access to a mainframe computer, nor to the teams of female calculators then employed for computation; his resources were broadly comparable to those available in the early nineteenth century – pencil, paper and mental arithmetic. He applied none of the standard statistical tests developed in the early twentieth century, simply re-sorting responses to the question, which could have been done at any time since the 1830s. This was enough to destroy the credibility of the conclusions reached by Senior and Chadwick.

⁷ The collections of the Kress and Goldsmiths' Libraries contain only a dozen pamphlets on the poor and high prices for the years 1794-95.

is not one formed by texts and ideas, but instead the perspective supplied by the *Annals* together with the *London Gazette* grain prices, presenting current prices of wheat as they appeared to contemporaries, using the data available to them, the better to understand their responses.

It is commonplace in modern commentary to use annual average prices for grain as an empirical referent, especially since so much recent historical research has been directed to the macroeconomic abstractions of a long-run annual rate of growth. This focus upon the long period disregards entirely the short-term price fluctuations that were the immediate contemporary experience; indeed, treats them as statistical noise to be smoothed away. We use here instead the weekly county average prices available since 1771, acknowledging their imperfections but demonstrating how much information they nevertheless contain. By taking the period 1794-96, during which a mediocre wheat harvest was followed by a very poor one, we aim to restore a perspective upon the dynamics of debate upon food, population and profits before it became the stock in trade of a new political economy. If we can in this way restore a contemporary perspective upon pauperism and market regulation, we might in turn cast fresh light on the post-Napoleonic period, when a new political economy positioned itself as a provider of legislative counsel on wages and welfare. The crisis of 1794-96 provides a baseline in which familiar problems of pauperism and price fluctuations arose, but at a time when the doctrines in terms of which they have since been read did not yet exist. Hence our focus upon how contemporaries understood the issues with which they were confronted.⁸

By examining just two successive harvest years we can also set aside most of the issues over which agrarian historians have argued during the last hundred years or more – landholding and access to common land, the scale and impact of parliamentary enclosure, the size and occupational composition of the rural working population, crop yields, labour productivity, shifts in land-use between arable and pasture, crop courses and labour requirements, Poor Law expenditure, settlement and migration – all these are here set to one side. This is not to say that these factors are unimportant or insignificant, but during the short period we have in view here none of them was capable of making a significant change to output: none addressed the eternal problem of fluctuating harvests, hence could not shift the boundaries of expectations regarding food security. Furthermore, although by no means a perfect cross-section of a rural intelligentsia, the contributors to the *Annals of Agriculture* can be credited with having a more consistent and local appreciation of agricultural matters than the average member of parliament, many of whose connection to a constituency was purely nominal.⁹

⁸ Walter M. Stern's "The Bread Crisis in Britain, 1795-96", *Economica* n. s. Vol. 31 (1964) pp. 168-87 deals with the same period, mainly using Parliamentary sources and reports printed in *The Times* to assess the cause and course of the crisis, and measures adopted to moderate it. His detailed account of the regulation of bread and the sources of imports is unparalleled. We have a different objective, however: to reconstruct the course taken by contemporary grain prices, so that we might better understand the arguments made at the time.

⁹ As would be that of David Ricardo, MP from 1819 for a constituency he never visited.

The first section outlines the process by which grain moves from field to final consumption. Treating “the grain market” as a sequence of actions and transactions in time enables us to better understand the significance of sudden shifts in prices, or indeed a lack of any such shift, in the context of the various factors at work through the harvest year. And this latter concept is employed here in place of the more usual calendar year, reorienting our perspective to the actual rhythm in which grain is produced, supplied and consumed. We then outline the regulatory framework within which the grain market operated: the Corn Laws, the Poor Laws, and the Assize of Bread. These long-established bodies of legislation sought to manage respectively the domestic price of grain, welfare transfers to the poor, elderly and indigent, and the retail price and quality of bread.¹⁰ We then emphasise how limited was the market information available in the 1790s regarding the production, sale and distribution of grain, besides the current and past prices; and the efforts made to remedy this deficiency. The *Annals of Agriculture* is important here, for while it was originally conceived as a forum for the dissemination of information about agricultural improvement, during times of high prices it became an important medium for the collection, collation and discussion of information about prices, wages, yields and grain supply.

Then we turn in the second section to the data that we do have on grain prices,¹¹ their strengths and limitations, and introduce graphics and tables designed to highlight the non-random features of price instability in the period under review. While the role of climate in harvest fluctuations has long been recognised, we are more concerned about “the weather”, the local impact of rainfall and temperature on crop yields. This relationship is only incompletely captured by records of national daily average temperatures or rainfall. Furthermore, while climate has long been linked to annual yield and so to actual supply, by our focus on the harvest year we are better able to capture patterns in price fluctuations relating to expectations about the likely size of the coming harvest, in part influenced by shifts in the current weather. Consequently we rely here more on contemporary description of changing weather patterns than on the data that is today available.

The third section outlines contributions to the *Annals of Agriculture* addressed to the problems created by the price fluctuations presented in Section 2, including the manner in which the *Annals* covered parliamentary debate on this matter. Discussion in the periodical

¹⁰ The last had an urban bias since in rural areas households often baked their own bread, or in Northern England prepared oatmeal. The classic account of the origins and actual (lack of) practical impact of the Assize of Bread is Sidney and Beatrice Webb, “The Assize of Bread”, *Economic Journal* Vol. 14 (1904) pp. 196-218, with discussion of the period 1794-95 at pp. 208-12.

¹¹ There is now a substantial literature on contemporary wages, most recently however questioning the construction of wage series used in support of the hypothesis that England was a “high wage” economy. For a thorough account of the limitations of the sources on which these series have been built, and the prevalence of wage rigidity, see Meredith Parker, Judy Stephenson, Patrick Wallis, “Nominal Wage Patterns, Monopsony, and Labour Market Power in Early Modern England”, LSE Working Papers No. 356 (2023). For an overview of the complications in constructing any standardised agricultural wage series, see A. H. John, “Statistical Appendix”, in G. E. Mingay (ed.) *The Agrarian History of England and Wales Vol. VI 1750-1850*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989 Table IV.5 Wages of Agricultural Labourers, 1793-1815 pp. 1080-88. Rental payments are excluded here for a number of reasons, in particular because their movement was only indirectly related to movements in product prices.

began in early 1795, associated in particular with a questionnaire that Arthur Young circulated and which quickly drew a large number of responses. Not until the autumn, following the harvest of 1795, did parliamentary discussion begin, with the establishment of Select Committees on prices and proposals for legislative intervention. These are briefly reviewed before noting the shift during 1796 in the *Annals* towards institutional reform of the Poor Laws, rather than mitigation of the immediate situation faced by working households.

The final section presents Edmund Burke's *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* as a belated and unsuccessful intervention into both extra-parliamentary and parliamentary debate. Recent commentary has connected Burke's analysis to arguments he supposedly found in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, seeking a connection with an emergent political economy. We suggest in contrast that the new doctrines of political economy that would shape debate in the early nineteenth century about pauperism and the Corn Laws did not yet exist, and so could not be mobilised in discussion during 1794-96. Burke's appraisal of wages and prices drew upon a legal framework, and did not anticipate what would shortly become known as political economy.

1. The Harvest Year, the Production Cycle and Market Regulation

As noted above, modern literature on the Corn Laws tends to rely upon mean annual domestic prices of wheat, barley and oats in their discussion of the waxing and waning of debate over the threshold prices for imports and exports. However, annualised data eliminates the problem with which we are here concerned: the nature and impact of short-term price fluctuations. The explicit purpose of the Corn Laws was to ensure a steady supply of grain at a price that rendered wheaten bread affordable for the great majority of the population, and in the later eighteenth century this price was thought to be about 60s. a quarter.¹² The poorer the household, the greater its reliance on bread for basic nutrition; while agricultural labourers generally considered white wheaten bread essential for adequate nutrition, rendering demand for it relatively inelastic to price changes.

The annual averages employed in modern accounts of ongoing parliamentary debate that, eventually, terminated in 1846 with the abolition of the Corn Laws are aggregated from weekly returns published since 1771 in the *London Gazette*.¹³ Until 1820 these recorded county average prices only, after that date recording price and quantities for each individual market. This was the primary source used for our period in the original archival research of

¹² Until 1921 a measure of volume in Britain, standardised in 1824 as equal to 8 Imperial bushels, or in metric units roughly 2.9 hectolitres; for a discussion of weights and measures see C. R. Fay, *The Corn Laws and Social England*, Cambridge University Press, London 1932 pp. 70ff. The local variation of contemporary weights and measures is demonstrated at length in John's "Statistical Appendix. Section VI", *Agrarian History Vol. VI* pp. 1117-1155.

¹³ As we note in Section 2, there are other sources, but the annual averages reproduced in Ch. XIV Table 17 "Average Prices of British Corn – England and Wales 1771-1980", B. R. Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988 pp. 756-58 are drawn from the official annualisation and nationalisation of *London Gazette* prices first published in 1843, at a time when these data were recorded by week and by individual market. As elsewhere in Mitchell, the figures presented are highly aggregated because of a dominating interest in national macroeconomic performance, obscuring actual market functioning.

American graduate students during the interwar years, chief among them Donald Grove Barnes, whose *History of the English Corn Laws* remains the standard work of reference.¹⁴ As we show in the following section, we should use this unaggregated data if we wish to understand contemporary debate over the price of grain, especially of wheat, and how prices might be managed. In so doing we also replace the calendar year as our base chronology with the harvest year – the twelve month period from the first days of September to the end of the following August, a year that begins at the point when the bulk of the English crops have just been harvested.¹⁵ Since the price during the following months is initially determined by the size and quality of the summer crop, then successively reflects the incidence of imports and of changing expectations regarding the coming crop, this provides a consistent chronology matching the issues with which we are here concerned. During the period under consideration wheat was sown in the autumn, while barley and oats were spring sown. Barley was primarily grown for distilling and malted for brewing beer; oats were in England primarily a fodder crop for horses, the principle power source for agriculture, transport and some early manufacturing enterprises where there was no suitable source of water.¹⁶ All grain crops were harvested in the summer, with an interval of around a month from south to north.¹⁷

Although some rural areas were predominantly pasture and others predominantly arable,¹⁸ at this time wheat was never sown on more than about one-third of the cultivated area and even in primarily arable areas shared courses with other crops.¹⁹ Much of the consumption of wheat was relatively local. Only London drew for its supply of grains on more

¹⁴ Donald Grove Barnes, *A History of the English Corn Laws from 1660 to 1846*, George Routledge and Sons, London 1930. Likewise William Freeman Galpin's University of Pennsylvania dissertation, *The Grain Supply of England during the Napoleonic Period*, Philadelphia 1925 exploits in great detail the *Gazette* data; while the basic research on English wages was done by Elizabeth W. Gilboy, *Wages in Eighteenth Century England*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1934. The standard source for the early modern English grain market is the doctoral dissertation of Norman Scott Brien Gras, published as *The Evolution of the English Corn Market from the Twelfth to the Eighteenth Century*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1915; while yet another American researcher, Abbott Payton Usher, wrote the standard history of the French grain trade: *The History of the Grain Trade in France 1400-1710*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1913. In this context we should also note Fay, *The Corn Laws* Ch. IV "Digression upon the Corn Trade around 1800"; Fay was English and was awarded a London doctorate in 1909, but as Professor of Economic History in Toronto 1921-30 he developed a knowledge of the Canadian grain trade that served him well. Gras, Galpin, Barnes and Fay remain the basic sources for study of English grain market regulation, supplemented by the work of yet another American graduate student, Susan Fairlie, whose 1959 London dissertation on the Russian grain trade underpins any discussion of the European grain market during the first half of the nineteenth century.

¹⁵ While the final quarter of the farming calendar began on 29 September with Michaelmas, when farm servants were hired for the year. The end of the first quarter was marked by Lady Day, 25 March, a peak of activity in chiefly pastoral farming.

¹⁶ Although draught oxen remained an important source: the 1801 Return for East Sussex recorded 6668 draught oxen and 8891 draught horses, significantly higher than for West Sussex – G. H. Kenyon, "The Civil Defence and Livestock Returns for Sussex in 1801, with Particular Reference to the Returns for Kirdford Parish in 1798", *Sussex Archaeological Collections* Vol. LXXXIX (1950) p. 61.

¹⁷ Today (16 August 2023), out on my [Keith Tribe] bike in West Worcestershire, combines had finally started work in two local fields, following a very hot and dry June, but a cold and very wet July.

¹⁸ A relationship that shifted over time, as demonstrated by another path-breaking book by an American, Ann Kussmaul's *General View of the Rural Economy of England, 1538-1840*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990, which uses parish marriage records to differentiate the local working year between predominantly pasture, arable or manufacturing areas (where there was no distinct annual parish pattern).

¹⁹ Including fallow – see B. A. Holderness, "Prices, Productivity and Output", in G. E. Mingay (ed.) *The Agrarian History of England and Wales* Vol. VI 1750-1850, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989 p. 129.

than one region,²⁰ and unlike in France there had never been formal impediments to the movement of grain out of area. The harvest period was succeeded by a lengthy period of threshing; combined with any carry-over from stored grain, new grain for consumption ordinarily first became available in late autumn. Minchinton noted for example that the harvest of 1800 was so poor that consumption in Warwickshire began immediately after threshing, implying that in more normal times local stocks were carried over for at least one or two months from the previous harvest year.²¹ Ploughing, harrowing and then the sowing of wheat would all have to take place before the weather deteriorated, the next burst of male agricultural activity being the spring sowing of barley and oats. For some three-quarters of the harvest year the wheat crop was in the ground, the future yield being affected adversely by the incidence of heavy rain, or lack of rain, or hard frosts, right up until the harvest began again. And even during the harvest weather conditions mattered: there was so much rain during the autumn of 1799 that the harvest dragged on for weeks, many fields in the north remaining unreaped in November, in some places the harvest even continuing to January.²²

But where the latest crop was stored once threshed and sold off the farm, and who it belonged to, is a different matter. In his survey of the structure of the grain market Holderness²³ emphasises that we know very little about the sale and marketing of grain in this period, except that the long-established legal framework regulating market trading was relaxed in 1773 and selling by sample in corn exchanges became increasingly common. Joyce Burnette's account of the seasonality of labour requirements based on farm accounts²⁴ has shed light on the extent to which grain was retained on farm and threshed through the year, spreading out the demand for male agricultural labour but in any case implying that the larger the farm, the greater was the capacity for delaying sale.²⁵ The reworking of Burnette's data by Liam Brunt and Edmund Cannon has shed further light on the pattern of storage and threshing, noting that about 29% of wheat was threshed in the three months before the next harvest, implying that grain tended to be held on farm unthreshed, rather than by traders as grain.²⁶

Nonetheless, the absence of information about the functioning of London wholesale and retail markets in the only recent article available underscores our continuing ignorance about

²⁰ Primarily from the upper Thames valley, from Kent and Sussex, and from Norfolk.

²¹ Walter E. Minchinton, "Agricultural Returns and the Government during the Napoleonic Wars", *Agricultural History Review* Vol. 1 (1953) p. 38. We will return to this issue of stocks in the following section.

²² B. A. Holderness, "Prices", p. 98.

²³ Holderness, "Prices", p. 85.

²⁴ Joyce Burnette, "The Seasonality of English Agricultural Employment: Evidence from Farm Accounts 1740-1850", in Richard W. Hoyle (ed.) *The Farmer in England, 1650-1980*, Ashgate, Farnham 2013 pp. 135-64.

²⁵ Charles Smith's *Three Tracts on the Corn-Trade and Corn-Laws* (1766) distinguished four farm-sizes according to their capacity to delay the sale of its crop, a useful approach but at the time a purely speculative one. See for an outline of Charles Smith's approach Keith Tribe, "Moral Economy and Market Order", *Critical Historical Studies* Vol. 8 No. 2 (Fall 2021) pp. 150-52. We will come back to Charles Smith since the *Three Tracts* was republished in 1795 and referred to in Parliament.

²⁶ Liam Brunt, Edmund Cannon, "English Farmers' Wheat Storage and Sales in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries", *Economic History Review* Vol. 75 (2022) p. 936.

the timing and volumes in the movement of grain from barn and outdoor storage to merchants to millers.²⁷ We unfortunately have no reliable information on the relation of farm size to the timing of sales, other than its reflection in current prices. Because flour deteriorated quickly once milled the crop was usually stored unthreshed and then traded as grain, most parishes having a local mill, from the mid-eighteenth century most millers buying on their own account, milling and then trading over a ten-mile radius. The technology of both windmills and watermills was significantly improved in this period, slowing the adoption of steam-power which in any case brought hazards of its own: the very large Albion Mill in London was totally destroyed by fire in 1791 after only five years in operation.²⁸ Nonetheless, at any one time significant amounts of London's grain supply would have either been in transit, being milled or being turned into bread, something which in itself possibly had a stabilising effect on the weekly prices recorded for Middlesex (ie. London). Since London also was a port it can be anticipated that imported grain would quickly have entered this local chain.

The regulatory framework governing English and Welsh grain markets dated back to the early seventeenth century, addressing both the ways in which local markets should be conducted and the conditions for exports and/or imports.²⁹ Foreign trade thresholds were periodically fixed that imposed duties on exports when domestic prices were high, permitted imports under the same conditions, while also providing bounties (subsidies) to merchants to export grain when domestic prices were low, securing revenue to farmers and encouraging them to maintain production of wheat. In fact, the government had no regular means of collecting information on grain prices, nor was any concerted effort made to enforce existing regulations. There were indeed no major periods of shortage during the first half of the eighteenth century; grain was exported and the population, even by contemporary estimates, was not increasing very much, if at all.³⁰ As Barnes noted, the Corn Laws were not during this period a matter of any great public controversy.³¹ But from mid-century female ages at marriage fell slightly, the birth rate rose and the death rate fell. The population began to

²⁷ Colin Smith, "The Wholesale and Retail Markets of London, 1660-1840", *Economic History Review* Vol. 5 (2002) pp. 31-50.

²⁸ Jennifer Tann, "Corn Milling", in G. E. Mingay (ed.) *The Agrarian History of England and Wales Vol. VI 1750-1850*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989 pp. 404-406, 412. The Albion Mill was a large multistorey brick and stone building sited at the southern end of Blackfriars Bridge.

²⁹ During the first half of the seventeenth century, high prices and shortages had been addressed by the government forcing the sale of private stocks. The presumption in seventeenth century England was that dearth resulted from market rigidities, rather than an absolute shortage of grain due to poor harvests. See for a discussion of the literature Randall Nielsen, "Storage and Government Intervention in Early Modern Grain Markets", *Journal of Economic History* Vol. 57 (1997) pp. 2-4. The policy of forcibly redistributing grain is not without risk. This was what caused the Ukrainian famine of 1932-34, with some 3m. deaths.

³⁰ Circumstances that should, according to Malthus's arguments on population and subsistence, have prompted a rapid rise in population. He did notice the anomaly, but had no explanation: "It is well known, that during this period the price of corn fell considerably, while the wages of labour are stated to have risen. ... The lower classes of people had been in the habit of being respected, both by the laws and the higher orders of their fellow citizens, and had learned in consequence to respect themselves. And the result was, that, instead of an increase of population exclusively, a considerable portion of their increased real wages was expended in a marked improvement of the quality of food consumed, and a decided elevation in the standard of their comforts and conveniences." T. R. Malthus, *Principles of Political Economy* [1820], ed. John Pullen, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989 Vol. I pp. 253-54.

³¹ Barnes, *History*, pp. 17-18.

increase rapidly, grain exports declined, and in the latter part of the century the domestic supply of wheat came under pressure from rising domestic demand, a succession of poor harvests, and the disruption of international trade. In 1793 France declared war on Britain, and from that same year Britain became a net importer of grains until the later twentieth century. The inflection point in public debate came with the poor harvest of 1756, and from his study of the contemporary pamphlet literature Barnes concluded that at this point the high prices following a number of poor harvests were mainly blamed on middlemen - corn buyers (badgers, kidders, laders, broggers and carriers) but also assemblers and speculators (factors, jobbers, merchants, corn chandlers, millers, maltsters, mealmen, flourmen, bakers, brewers, distillers and taverners).³² Initially the most common solution advanced during the period 1756-1773 was to enforce Tudor statutes regulating their activities. However, attention soon switched from the role of the export bounty and middlemen to other factors:

Clearly, the most popular explanation was the wickedness of the middlemen. Adulteration of bread by the bakers, war taxes, national debt, corruption in court, luxury of all classes, payment of tithe in kind, enclosure and engrossing of farms, and bad harvests, all had their advocates. The remedies suggested, naturally, depended upon the explanation offered. To curb the middlemen the most popular suggestions were to enforce the laws against forestallers, engrossers and regrators; to forbid the exportation of grain; to prevent the use of grain in distilleries; to erect public granaries; and to place restrictions on combinations of corn dealers. Those who defended the middlemen insisted that the best way to secure relief was by protecting the latter from mobs. Pamphleteers who held bakers responsible believed that the best remedy was a new law regulating the assize of bread. Advocates of enclosure were convinced that the solution lay in extending the area of cultivation and in improving farming methods.³³

Parliament met late in 1756 and passed an act temporarily prohibiting the export of corn, malt, meal, flour, bread, biscuit and starch. This was followed by a burst of legislative activity aimed at boosting the domestic supply of bread grains. In 1764 a poor harvest set debate off yet again, and in the succeeding flurry of activity provision was made in 1770 for Justices of the Peace to make weekly returns of grain prices to the Treasury, to be published in the *London Gazette*. From 1771 a price series existed that was no longer based on the average of the Lady Day and Michaelmas grain prices in Windsor market.³⁴ Legislation in 1772 repealed statutes restricting the sale and purchase of grain in local markets, while adjustments were made in 1772 and 1773 to the Corn Law thresholds. During the 1770s the harvests were poor, and the pamphlet literature now turned to the issue of enclosures as either the cause of

³² Barnes, *History*, p. 33.

³³ Barnes, *History*, p. 37.

³⁴ Barnes, *History*, p. 41.

the high prices, or their solution.³⁵ Opinion turned against the 1773 Act, and in 1791 a new Act was introduced that replaced all previous legislation, but which itself was almost always either suspended or inactive.³⁶ The 1792 harvest was poor; then in 1794 there was a hot and dry summer creating a deficiency that was however not felt until early 1795 because the harvest had been early and the condition of the grain good. But the winter of 1794-95 was one of the three worst in the eighteenth century, contributing to a very poor wheat crop in 1795.

The ensuing debate on the high price of grain now took a new turn: rather than seeking to identify conniving merchants, public concern shifted to the problem that the wages of male agricultural labourers were too low to subsist their families, even taking account of the paid work of females and children in the household. What we do not encounter in discussion at this time is any idea that the working poor deliberately formed large households so that they might live “on the parish”. This was a later narrative. In any case and as already noted, the increase in the rural population had begun in the mid-eighteenth century and by the end of the century was already into its second generation. This nullifies any argument that large and poor households were the consequence of overgenerous parish relief, rather than a rising population and higher prices being the cause of rising expenditure.³⁷ As we shall see in Section 3, controversy about the role of parish relief in the pauperisation of agricultural labour is notably absent from the period we have in view here, but a brief outline of contemporary provisions will help contextualise this absence.

Legislation regarding the poor, old and indigent dates in England and Wales from the end of the sixteenth century, the parish being made responsible for levying and administering a local poor rate. While there was considerable discretion in the support offered to those settled in the parish, until the mid-eighteenth century the system primarily assisted paupers unable to support themselves, chiefly by placing them in workhouses or poorhouses. During the second half of the century assistance began to be provided in some localities to able-bodied workers, supporting the seasonally-unemployed by allocating them to farmers who were then subsidised by the parish. Exactly how widespread this and related measures were is unclear, since the first general survey of provision we have is for 1802-1803, and no systematic survey of the scattered sources that exist for the preceding period has yet been made. James Huzel³⁸ does note that from the 1770s the existence of able-bodied men in need of relief began to appear in parish overseers’ account books, while an act 1782 for the

³⁵ Barnes, *History*, p. 54.

³⁶ It also designated twelve maritime districts whose foreign trade in grain was governed by the local prices; then the average of the twelve districts was substituted, then in 1804 an average was struck four times a year. This meant that even when the terms of the legislation were active, they did not apply uniformly across the country – Richard Perren, “Markets and Marketing”, in G. E. Mingay (ed.) *The Agrarian History of England and Wales Vol. VI 1750-1850*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989 p. 211.

³⁷ But see the comments on Polanyi and Blaug above. Samantha Williams summarises the revisionist account in “Malthus, Marriage and Poor Law Allowances Revisited: A Bedfordshire Case Study, 1770-1834”, *Agricultural History Review* Vol. 52 (2004) pp. 56-82.

³⁸ James P. Huzel, “The Labourer and the Poor Law, 1750-1850” in G. E. Mingay (ed.) *The Agrarian History of England and Wales Vol. VI 1750-1850*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989 p. 771.

first time included provisions for the relief of the able-bodied poor through monetary outdoor assistance. George Boyer likewise emphasised that payment of outdoor relief was widespread before 1795, and long recognised in the literature.³⁹

But it was a meeting of Justices of the Peace on 6 May 1795 at the Pelican Inn, Speenhamland that came to symbolise a wholesale shift to outdoor relief and an allowance system – support for the working poor. The “Speenhamland System” provided for payments to be made according to a sliding-scale of allowances calculated according to household size, payable to married men in work but who were unable to adequately support their families.⁴⁰ In fact a similar scale had been proposed in Oxford that January,⁴¹ and as will become apparent in Section 3, “Speenhamland” took a long time to enter circulation as an emblematic idea. The full scale was printed in Eden’s *State of the Poor*,⁴² but the “System” was always more symbol than template. And as we can see in its use by Karl Polanyi, it has ever since generally been used symbolically, to condemn the pauperising impact of welfare payments, implicitly retrofitting arguments that first fully developed in the 1820s onto an earlier period in which they were rarely made. This will become very obvious when we come to discuss the response to dearth and high prices in the *Annals of Agriculture*.

The narrative regarding population, employment and welfare that prevailed from the 1820s to the 1960s was not widely employed during the period 1793-1815.⁴³ As already noted with the work of Mark Blaug, the survey data collected during the 1820s and early 1830s was at the time never subjected to any systematic assessment, being used instead as a source of illustrative material for prior ideological positions. It was so easy to superimpose later prejudice onto previous conditions because there was in the later eighteenth century so little accessible and systematic evidence about population, employment and welfare: opinion trumped empirical fact. One thread running through the preceding discussion is the contemporary absence of consistent and comparable data on population, poor relief, crop yields, and imports and exports of grain. All contemporaries really had until the early 1800s was weekly grain prices from 1771, by county; while today some would claim that reliable runs of wages data have now been constructed, their confidence is today vigorously contested.⁴⁴ The *London Gazette* grain prices do however turn out to be a very useful source,

³⁹ George R. Boyer, *An Economic History of the English Poor Law 1750-1850*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990 p. 23.

⁴⁰ The standard history of social policy for this period is dated from 1795 with Speenhamland, ending with the New Poor Law of 1834 – John R. Poynter, *Society and Pauperism. English Ideas on Poor Relief, 1795-1834*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1969, based on a 1961 University of Melbourne dissertation.

⁴¹ As noted by Poynter, *Society and Pauperism*, p. 78.

⁴² Sir Frederick Morton Eden, *The State of the Poor: or, An History of the Labouring Classes of England*, Vol. I London 1797 p. 577 for the full scale.

⁴³ So, for example, it took some time after 1798 for Malthus’s name to become widely associated with an argument about human fertility and subsistence, notwithstanding his appointment to a chair of political economy and history at East India College in late 1804.

⁴⁴ It is generally true that those who have laboured so long and hard to construct long-run data series supporting arguments about early modern growth, prices and wages lose sight of the limitations of the basic data upon which they have built. As a short cut, see Jane Humphries’ review of John Hatcher, Judy Z. Stephenson (eds.) *Seven*

notwithstanding their multiple defects, a matter dealt with in the following section. While the collation and publication of national grain prices did begin with the *London Gazette* series, it was the crisis of 1795 that prompted the first systematic efforts to collect and collate information other than grain prices. Early in 1795 the *Annals of Agriculture* printed a questionnaire drafted by Young regarding the current stocks of grain, expectations of the next harvest, and the methods adopted for the relief of the poor. A minor deluge of letters and responses quickly followed. Then the Board of Agriculture, established with government support in 1794, quickly arranged for a comprehensive series of county reports to be made. In June 1795 the Board also

...proposed the issue of a questionnaire asking "the landed interest": (i) What number of acres are, by estimation, or from regular survey, contained in your parish, constablewick, tithing, division, or district? and (ii) How many of such acres are arable, how many generally kept under each species of crop, how many in fallow, and how many in grass? A month later it sent out a statement "on the present scarcity of provision" suggesting "measures to prevent any risk of real want previous to the ensuing harvest." The Board clearly stated that "the collecting of information respecting the agricultural state of the country" was necessary before measures could be recommended to parliament.⁴⁵

Then, in late October, the Secretary of State for Home Affairs, the Duke of Portland, circulated a letter to county lord lieutenants seeking a comparison of the 1794 grain harvest yield with that more commonly prevailing. The response was patchy and often vague, the attempt highlighting more the obstacles to collecting consistent data than actually producing useable information. Not until the Third Report of the Select Committee on the High Price of Grain were these returns mentioned, noting that it was a shortfall in the wheat crop, not those of barley and oats, that was the problem. Then in 1797 and 1798 fear of French invasion prompted plans to move the population away from the south coast, and the lords lieutenant were asked to compile information on numbers of waggons and horses, mills and baking ovens, of live and dead stock, and the amount of acres under specific crops.⁴⁶ Similar investigations were launched in the early 1800s, for the first time giving Parliamentary Select Committees evidence independent of what they might be told by the witnesses they summoned. By the summer of 1801 printed forms were being distributed by the Home Office throughout England and Wales via Church dioceses, local clergy being requested to enter the acreage sown since the previous year's harvest of wheat, barley, oats, potatoes, beans, peas, and turnips. Forwarded by the Home Office to the Board of Agriculture for comment, the Board warned that the responses were so unreliable as to be unusable.⁴⁷

Centuries of Unreal Wages, Economic History Review Vol. 73 (2020) pp. 1203-1204.

⁴⁵ Minchinton, "Agricultural Returns", p. 32.

⁴⁶ Minchinton, "Agricultural Returns", p. 36.

⁴⁷ Minchinton, "Agricultural Returns", p. 40.

A final issue here is the role of stocks, alluded to above where we noted that, in the months following a harvest, the ownership and physical location of grain was not something local or central authorities knew very much about in the later eighteenth century. Recurring appeals for the establishment of public granaries capable of buying in during periods of low prices and releasing stocks during periods of high prices reflected a belief that the latter were more related to market failure than to an absolute shortfall. But stocks had to be held throughout the harvest year, and usually included some provision for the subsequent year as part of the normal inventory. Shortage in one year would be serially correlated with that of the next, so long as the harvest was not exceptionally large, since inventories would require restocking.⁴⁸ Our working assumption here is that persistently high and increasing prices were a function primarily of harvest shortfall and the lack of sufficient and timely imports, rather than a consequence of market manipulation; and secondarily, of expectations about these factors. We now need to consider what we might learn from price movements during the two harvest years here under consideration.

⁴⁸ Writing in October 1800, Rev. Henry Beeke attributed current shortages to the deficiency in the 1799 crop, not to any problems with the harvest just completed. He also provides an interesting commentary on the weather prevailing during the harvest year leading up to the 1800 – Salim Rashid, "The Scarcity of 1800: A Contemporary Account", *Agricultural History Review* Vol. 28 (1980) pp. 115-19.

2. Food Security 1794-96: The Variation and Variability of Grain Prices

While Galpin and Barnes had made systematic use of the Gazette price series, they are not referred to at all in Deane and Cole's *British Economic Growth 1688-1959*, a five and ten-year average wheat price index for the eighteenth century⁴⁹ being based on Beveridge's *Prices and Wages*.⁵⁰ Boyd Hilton's *Corn, Cash, Commerce* does have one table of monthly wheat prices 1812 to 1829,⁵¹ but these are taken from Tooke's *History of Prices* without further comment, Hilton's work being primarily a political history based on extensive documentary research. Even this monthly series is a national average, disregarding the availability from 1821 of weekly prices and quantities sold in local markets. Attention was once again drawn to the availability of the London Gazette series for local markets by Lucy Adrian in 1977, outlining some possible sources of inconsistency in variable definitions of the "market" in space and time, but then making a local case study for Bury St. Edmunds during 1846-47 to test the reliability and utility of the returns that highlighted the role of transport costs in local variation.⁵²

A comment published the following year questioned the value of the *Gazette* returns before 1821; but here Wray Vamplew addressed only national prices. Adrian had made no claim that national figures were reliable; she was interested not in national trends, rather in how local markets related to each other dynamically, the relationship between changes in their prices, not their relative level. In any case, Vamplew's recalculations of annual averages for 1829-59 also show relatively minor variations: a maximum variance between the official and recalculated price of 2.5% for wheat and 8.1% for barley, with only two anomalous records.⁵³

Vamplew's emphasis upon the various sources of inconsistency in the *Gazette* data should by rights have simply reinforced a sceptical and cautious approach to the uses made of any economic data, especially the aggregated and inferential data upon which so much weight has come to be placed. Instead, Adrian's innovative use of the Corn Returns simply

⁴⁹ Phyllis Deane, W. A. Cole, *British Economic Growth 1688-1959*, 2nd edition Cambridge University Press, London 1969 Table 23 p. 91. Gazette prices and quantities do underpin the official sources used in Susan Fairlie's work, especially "The Corn Laws and British Wheat Production, 1829-76", *Economic History Review* Vol. 22 No. 1 (1969) pp. 88-116. But as pointed out by Lucy Adrian, for her purposes Fairlie only uses national and county totals, not the available local market returns - Adrian, "The Nineteenth Century Gazette Corn Returns from East Anglian Markets", *Journal of Historical Geography* Vol. 3 No. 3 (1977) p. 217.

⁵⁰ William Beveridge, *Prices and Wages in England from the Twelfth to the Nineteenth Century Vol. I*, Longmans, Green & Co., London 1939: quarterly prices for wheat from 1770 to 1810 p. 84, from the Winchester College series; and monthly prices based on London Navy Victualling records, pp. 566-68.

⁵¹ Boyd Hilton, *Corn, Cash, Commerce. The Economic Policies of the Tory Governments 1815-1830*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977 pp. 7-8.

⁵² Adrian, "Nineteenth Century Gazette Corn Returns", pp. 226-28, 233-34.

⁵³ Wray Vamplew, "The Nineteenth Century Gazette Corn Returns: A Word of Warning", *Journal of Historical Geography* Vol. 4 No. 3 (1978) pp. 291-93. Vamplew did eventually have the good grace to provide much more detail on the sources of inconsistency across and within markets in the *Gazette* data - "A Grain of Truth: The Nineteenth-Century Corn Averages", *Agricultural History Review* Vol. 28 (1980) pp. 1-17; but as we shall see, for our purposes, focussed on short-term fluctuations and not long-run averages, none of these problems is significant.

disappeared from the literature, there being no further mention of her work until 2015.⁵⁴ In 2013 Liam Brunt and Edmund Cannon provided a comprehensive account of the origin and development of the Corn Returns that neglected to mention Adrian's work, while repeating some of the points she had already made.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, their detailed survey of the background to and development of the *Gazette* price series⁵⁶ concludes that the Corn Returns are the most important, and also reliable, source for British grain markets between 1770 and 1914, noting also that "They probably constitute the largest single body of data on the British economy before 1914."⁵⁷ Their more recent work on farm storage builds on this by using farm accounts to estimate the relationship between storage and sales – although in the case of 1794-96, with two successive poor harvests, stocks would have been very reduced and contributed to the acceleration of new sales off-farm.⁵⁸

Fig. 1 presents weekly prices from 1770 for London (Middlesex) and its related sources of coastal supply from Sussex, Kent and Norfolk. This isolates a distinct subgroup among English counties that was a distinct market and which also influenced national price formation. We use a scatter plot that clearly shows up several important points: that fluctuations were at times extreme; that prices in the four counties tended to move together; and that the dispersion between county prices was limited, and consistently so.

⁵⁴ In D'Maris Coffman, David Ormrod, "Corn Prices, Corn Models and Corn Rents: What Can We Learn from the English Corn Returns?", in Martin Allen, D'Maris Coffman (eds.) *Money, Prices and Wages. Essays in Honour of Professor Nicholas Mayhew*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2015 pp. 196-210. This was linked to a project that has digitised the post-1820 *Gazette* data, available at <https://www.cornreturnsonline.org/>.

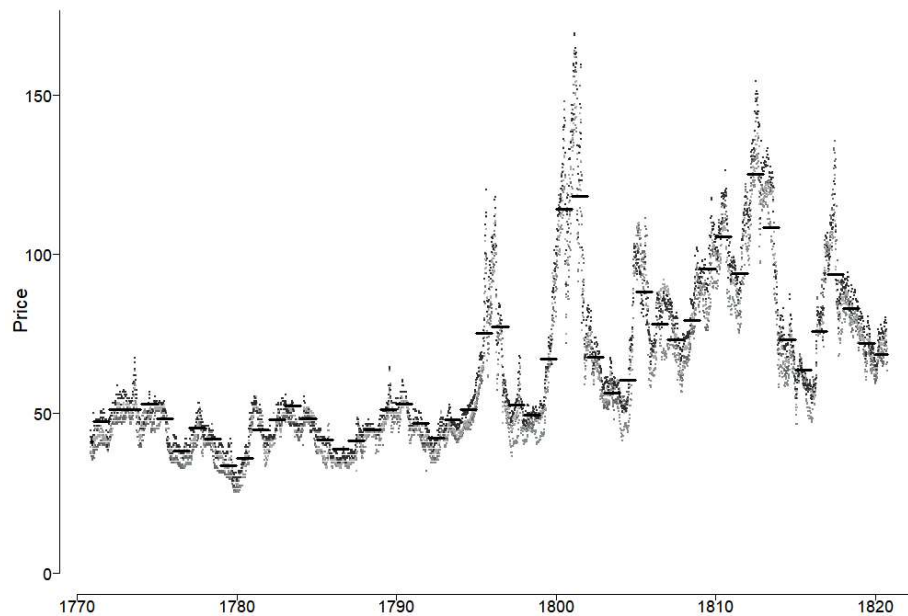
⁵⁵ We are very grateful to Edmund Cannon for his generosity in giving us the pre-1820 digitised Corn Return data used below. However, it remains true that this article recapitulates many of the points originally made by Adrian, and while they note that only 25% of output was traded (p. 323), this also was noted by Adrian in her discussion of selling by sample and the definition of the market space. They tend to credit Vamplew's 1980 article with what Adrian had already written in 1977: Liam Brunt, Edmund Cannon, "The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth: The English Corn Returns as a Data Source in Economic History, 1770-1914", *European Review of Economic History* Vol. 17 (2013) pp. 318-39.

⁵⁶ Brunt and Cannon report many of the features of the digitized data in term of its construction, and its coverage over time. We can add one further characteristic, which appears on close inspection of the data: before 1st June 1793 prices are reported in whole shillings, while after the start of June 1793 the prices are reported in shillings and pence. This appears clearly when the weekly price changes are plotted against time. Assuming this is the result of some intentional rounding when the data was created, this feature does not however change the overall conclusions we report. Calculation of the average weekly price change before and after June 1793 shows that the mean weekly price change is zero in both sub-periods, while the standard deviation of the weekly price change more than doubles after June 1793. The average weekly price variation between the counties ranges between 61.8 shillings (Northumberland) and 74.66 (Westmorland) before 1795, and between 116.9 (Northumberland) and 133.15 (Monmouthshire) after. The simple unweighted means (medians) across counties in either sub-periods are 68.4 (68.4) and 122.29 (122.9).

⁵⁷ Brunt, Cannon, "The Truth", p. 337,

⁵⁸ Brunt, Cannon, "English Farmers' Wheat Storage", pp. 952-55.

Fig. 1. Comparison of Middlesex Wheat Prices (black dots) with Norfolk, Sussex, and Kent (grey dots), with calculated annual average as bars (calendar years, shillings per quarter)



The manner in which the construction of an annual average of these four series significantly moderates volatility is of course predictable, but all the same striking at times of high volatility. By construction the average yearly price follows the evolution of prices; Fig. 1 shows however that the variability around the yearly average is large in particular in times of “crisis”, i.e. when prices are high. Since the weekly prices are those available to contemporaries and in terms of which they argued, their real evolution is important to our following discussion.

We examine the variation between Middlesex and the other counties in Fig. 2. This shows that there are sometimes large differences between the Middlesex weekly prices and those of the other counties. Each point represents the difference (in shillings) between the price in a given county and the price in Middlesex. There are sometimes large differences between the county weekly prices and Middlesex. In some cases (Norfolk) the differences can be long-lasting – Norfolk prices are more often than not below the prices for Middlesex, especially after 1800.

Fig. 2 Weekly Price Differences (shillings per qr. of wheat) for Norfolk, Sussex and Kent with respect to Middlesex

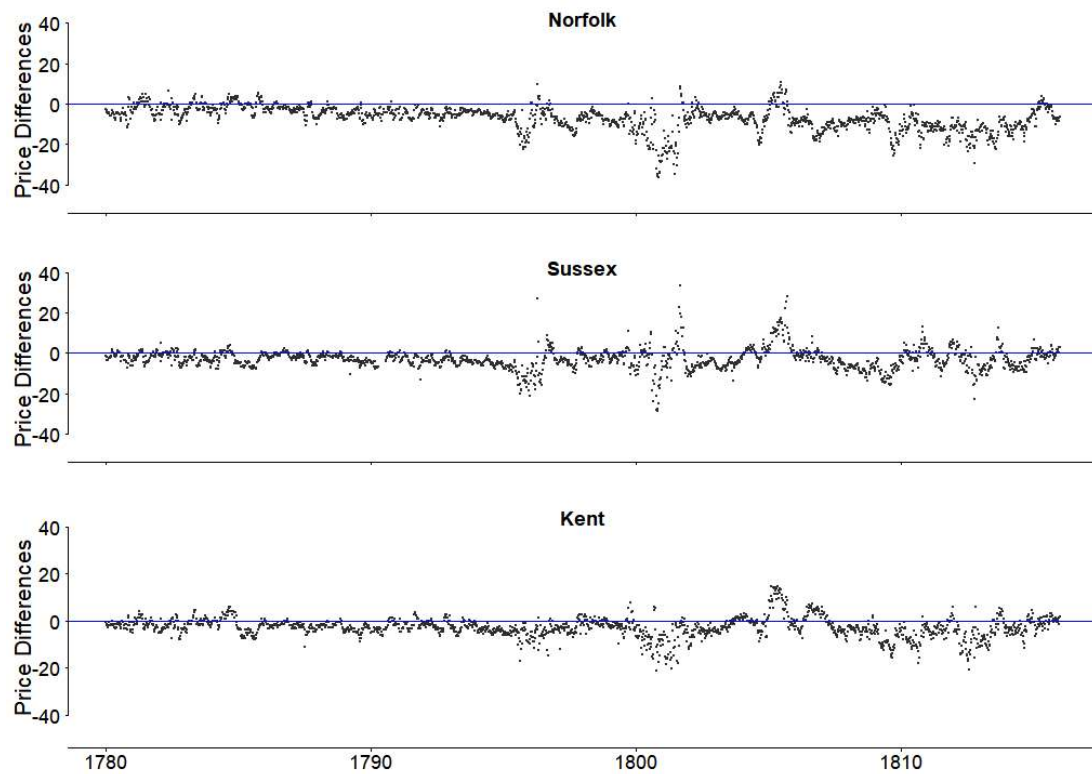
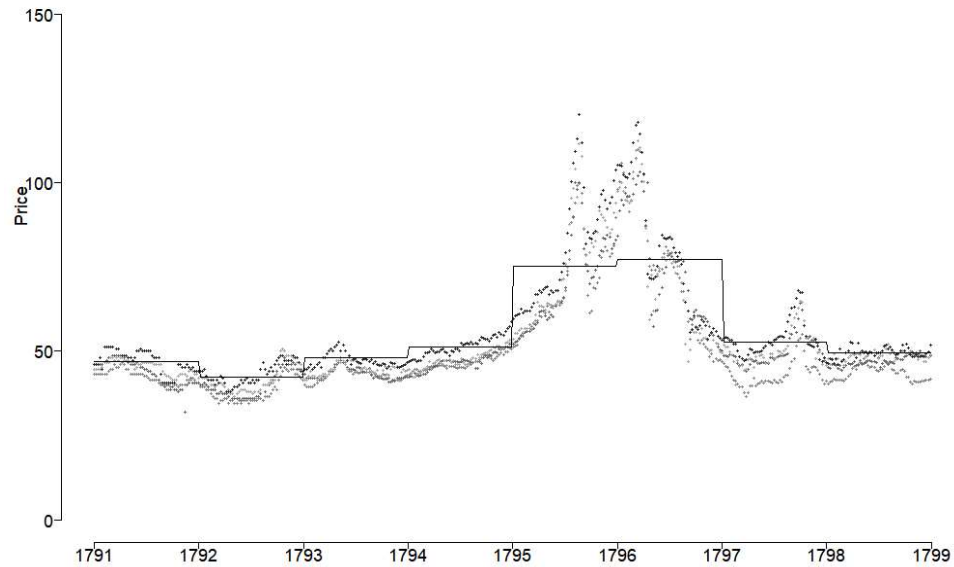


Fig. 3 then focusses on the same four counties during the 1790s. Here it can be seen that while differences between county prices do exist, opening out during periods of rapid upward change, but not downward, the pattern of fluctuation is common to all the counties. Our interest here is primarily in the pattern of fluctuations, not the dispersion of county prices; and Figures 1, 2 and 3 together confirm the existence of a common pattern of fluctuation across these counties.

Fig. 3: Weekly Wheat Prices 1791-99 in shillings per quarter: scatter plot for Middlesex, Sussex, Kent, Norfolk, with annual average indicated by thick line segments



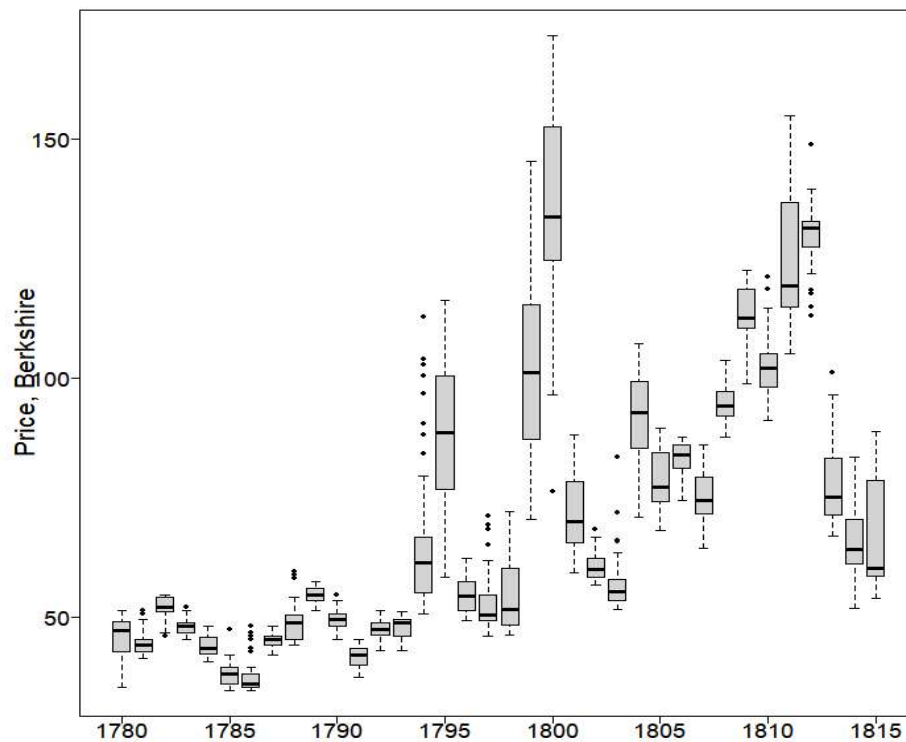
If we then turn to wheat prices for the county of Berkshire we can gain some insight into the relationship of their evolution to the timing of the proposal made by Berkshire JPs in May 1795. Table 1 compares the first and third quartiles of prices for a year beginning in September, the harvest year.

Table 1. Berkshire Wheat Prices 1780-1815 in shillings per quarter, harvest years commencing September of each calendar year

Year	Min.	1st Qu.	Median	Mean	3rd Qu.	Max.
1780	35.3	42.7	47.0	45.5	48.8	51.3
1781	41.3	42.7	44.0	44.8	45.3	51.3
1782	46.0	51.2	52.0	51.8	54.0	54.7
1783	45.3	46.7	48.0	47.8	48.7	52.0
1784	40.7	42.5	43.3	44.0	45.5	48.0
1785	34.7	36.0	38.0	38.1	39.3	47.3
1786	34.7	35.3	36.0	37.4	38.0	48.0
1787	42.0	44.0	45.3	45.2	46.0	48.0
1788	44.0	45.3	48.7	48.7	50.2	59.3
1789	51.3	53.3	54.7	54.7	56.0	57.3
1790	45.3	48.0	49.3	49.4	50.7	54.7
1791	37.3	40.0	42.0	41.7	43.3	45.3
1792	43.0	46.2	47.3	47.5	48.7	51.3
1793	42.8	46.0	48.7	47.7	49.5	51.0
1794	50.6	55.1	61.3	66.0	66.5	112.8
1795	58.2	76.7	88.6	88.7	100.3	116.2
1796	49.2	51.5	54.3	54.7	57.1	62.2
1797	46.0	49.1	50.3	52.9	54.4	71.2
1798	46.2	48.2	51.6	54.5	60.1	72.0
1799	70.3	87.2	101.1	102.7	115.1	145.3
1800	76.1	124.9	133.5	135.4	152.4	171.5
1801	59.2	65.6	69.9	71.6	78.3	88.0
1802	56.6	58.4	59.9	60.5	62.2	68.2
1803	51.6	53.5	55.2	56.8	57.9	83.4
1804	70.8	85.2	92.8	91.6	99.2	107.2
1805	68.1	74.0	77.1	78.8	84.2	89.3
1806	74.4	81.1	83.9	83.3	85.8	87.5
1807	64.4	71.5	74.4	75.0	78.5	86.0
1808	87.5	92.0	94.1	94.5	97.0	103.7
1809	98.8	110.4	112.4	113.3	118.4	122.5
1810	91.0	98.0	102.1	101.9	105.0	121.0
1811	105.0	114.8	119.2	126.2	136.7	154.8
1812	112.8	127.5	131.2	129.9	132.6	148.8
1813	66.9	71.3	75.1	77.8	82.6	101.0
1814	51.8	61.0	64.1	65.5	70.3	83.4
1815	53.8	58.6	60.1	67.0	78.5	88.7

The following graph presents the same information as in Table 1:

Fig. 4: Box and Whisker Plot of Table 1



The Figure show a box and whiskers plot of the prices in Berkshire for every year between 1780 and 1815. The length of the lower and upper limits of each box represent the first and third quartile of the distribution of prices in a particular year. The horizontal line within the box indicates the level of the median price that year (the means and medians are not that different in our data). The whiskers extend 1.5 of the interquartile range below the first quartile or above the third quartile. If the maximum price in that year is within 1.5 times the interquartile range above the third quartile, then the end of the whisker (upwards) is set at the maximum (similarly for the minimum). If there are instead some observations beyond this limit, each value is then plotted beyond, above or below, the whisker.

Early periods are characterised by less annual variability and relatively more stable prices, while the later years exhibit more price variability within the year (the size of the boxes and the length of the whiskers are larger). Years where the median prices are high correspond in general to periods of larger annual price variability (the interquartile range is wider), and in some cases (for example 1800) to a much wider difference between the smaller and the larger weekly price within that year (the distance between the end of the whiskers is larger). Evident from Figure 4 is the significance of the change that occurred in the harvest year beginning September 1795.

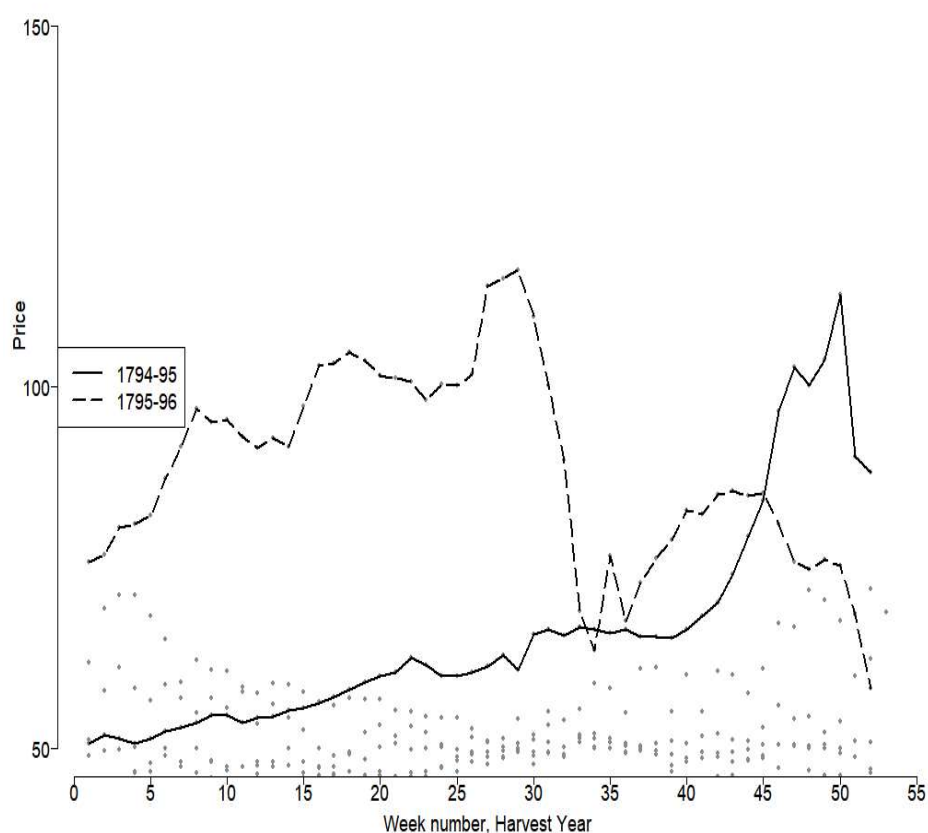
It was the meeting of Berkshire JPs at the Pelican Inn, Speenhamland in May 1795 that (eventually) put into circulation the idea that rising poor relief was due to subsidies paid to working adults on a sliding scale of the number of children in the household (outdoor relief), a practice which, it would later be said, diminished the incentive to work. However, no reference to “Speenhamland” can be found anywhere in the *Annals of Agriculture* before 1797, and even after Eden’s *State of the Poor* had highlighted the sliding scale in 1797, for a long time “Speenhamland” did not represent a particular social policy. Indeed, searching local newspapers turns up only a brief report of the meeting, in *The Courier* for 13 May 1795, an item that was not repeated in other publications as seemed to be the practice at the time.

Why did the Berkshire magistrates meet and agree such a measure? Additionally, why did their action go unremarked during the remainder of 1795 and 1796? Examination of the Berkshire wheat prices in these years can perhaps convey some sense of the urgency they felt. While during the period 1794-96 Table 1 shows that the mean and the median prices for the calendar year are throughout roughly the same, the story is very different if we look at the price in the first and the third quartiles. Up until September 1793 the prices are comparable, showing a marked increase for the third quartile in 1794 and almost doubling from first to third for 1795-96. The high prices beginning in 1808 do not show the same degree of peakiness – high prices certainly, but in a more sustained fashion. Given our working assumption, that it is rapid changes in prices rather than sustained high prices that created a sense of crisis, this provides some sort of general illumination of the situation facing the Berkshire JPs in May 1795. From Fig. 1 it is evident that up until late 1794 prices fluctuated within a relatively predictable band. By early 1795 upward fluctuation had turned into a trend, creating a new situation compared with previous years. We suggest that it was this evidence of a regional shift that created the sense of alarm first registered in Arthur Young’s January 1795 circular, and the responses to it. While it is true that, compared with subsequent prices changes, evident in Fig. 1, the 1795-96 crisis was on a smaller scale, the fact that this was a new phenomenon led to the reaction that we record in Section 3.

Figure 5 then plots on the same axes Berkshire wheat prices for each harvest year 1791-98 – from September of any given year to the end of the following August in the same figure. The evolution through a particular year is indicated by the week number (horizontal axis) while the vertical axis describes the price level. Here we can see more clearly the price evolution in May 1795 as compared with previous years. The continuous line shows the evolution of the price in 1794-95 and the dashed line for 1795-96. The scatter plot at the bottom represents the prices for all years, excluding 1794 and 1795. We observe therefore that for the two harvest years beginning 1794 and 1795 the price level changed relative to the other years, and that the evolution of prices over time differs between the harvest year 1794 and 1795. In 1794 high prices rose sharply at the end of the calendar year, while in 1795 prices were relatively high early on and decreased later in the year. The abrupt fall around Week 30 of 1795-96 reflects the impact of government sales and the arrival of private imports

during March 1796 (from week 27 to 30).⁵⁹ By contrast, in 1795 the Berkshire magistrates seem to have been reacting to a sudden further surge in prices during April, while the fact that prices then remained the same until late June, only then resuming a rapid rise, might account for the lack of any immediate reaction to the Pelican Inn meeting. While prices did fall in August, they quickly returned to the same level and more, the distance between the autumn prices for 1794-95 and 1795-96 indicating quite why it was thought, during the autumn of 1795, that government intervention was needed.

Fig. 5. Graph for Evolution of Berkshire Wheat Prices over the Harvest Years 1791-98
(shillings per qr.)



When a sudden upward price change occurs that appears to break with a previous pattern of price fluctuations it can generate an expectation that this change could itself become a new trend – a line of thought that we attribute to the Berkshire JPs.

Added to this, the harvest year itself generated a pattern of expectations, deriving first from the sufficiency of the new harvest and modified by the weather pattern on the way to the next. We can register this evolution by turning to data from the post-1821 Corn Returns,

⁵⁹ Stern, "Bread Crisis", pp. 180-181.

which were reported by market, not by county. Instead of having 52 county observations for any one year, we have 52 observations times the number of reporting markets in the counties – in our case of Norfolk, 572 local observations. This enables us to gauge the degree of variation of future prices relative to any point in the harvest year, and so gain some perspective on the expectations an actor on the selling (or buying) side might form of future prices. We wish to emphasise market participants did face considerable uncertainty regarding the evolution of market prices, which we highlight by using a harvest year to organise the data. The impact of government intervention on March 1796 prices in Berkshire shows how the sudden influx of imports could shift expectations of future prices for a while, but adverse current weather conditions would alter expectations of future prices more directly.

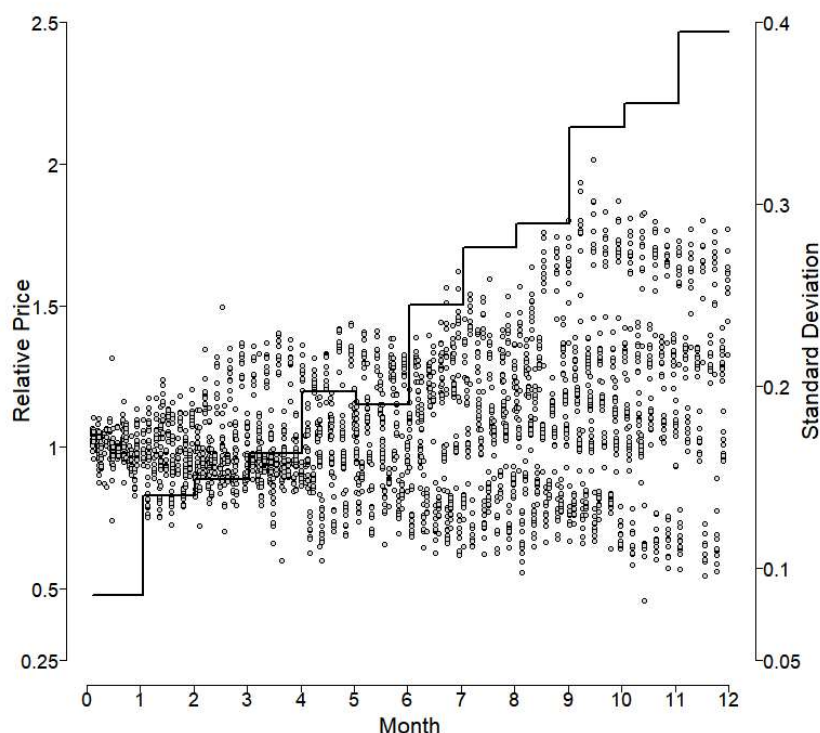
Figure 6 presents wheat prices from eleven Norfolk markets⁶⁰ for the years October 1820 to July 1828, scaled by the average price in September for each market. The scaled prices are then on average equal to 1 in the September of each harvest year. We then overlay the weekly prices⁶¹ in each market for several years on the weeks of one single (hypothetical) harvest year, giving 88 data points for each week. This figure suggest that from the point of view of the price information available when the harvest is collected uncertainty over prices for the coming year is large; prices can halve or double, increasing over time. We also show how the standard deviation of (the scaled) prices changes over the year (continuous step line).

While these prices necessarily come from a later period, they provide perspective on how expectations might form at an important point in the harvest year. It is clear that the market clearing process, even at a local level, provided wheat producers with a good idea of the “market price” for wheat at the county level and at the national level. Careful planning under such conditions will be difficult. Storing grain in the hope that the price will double over a year would expose a merchant to a loss of half of the value of his stock if the price did not double. Similarly, selling all the stock at the current price leaves the producer exposed to substantial possible losses if the prices did increase – representing the opportunity cost of selling at a point prior to a subsequent rise in price. Those reliant on the grain for food would not be able to insure themselves in any way against such price volatility.

⁶⁰ Specifically the data reports on the weekly prices in Aylesham, Diss, East Dereham, Fakenham, Harleston, Holt, Lynn, North Walsham, Norwich, Watton, Yarmouth. Norfolk has been selected because of its importance to the London market. Moreover Norfolk is the county with the largest number of markets available. We collected the wheat data for the Norfolk markets between 1820 and 1828 from www.cornreturnsonline.org on 28th February 2020.

⁶¹ Scaled by the average price in September for each market. The scaled prices are then on average equal to 1 in September of each harvest year.

Fig. 6 Range of annual weekly prices relative to September in each Year, eleven local Norfolk Markets, October 1820-July 1828



Our presentation of the *London Gazette* price data therefore provides some insight into the responses to a sudden increase in the price of wheat that we review in the following section. Despite the inherent limitations of the Corn Returns – local inconsistencies of measurement, in recording the returns, and the prevalence of selling by sample outside the local markets – this data provides us with a much richer understanding of the actual evolution of wheat prices than we have previously had for the 1790s, providing a richer context for the debates to which they gave rise.

3. The *Annals of Agriculture*

The *Annals of Agriculture* was a project initiated by Arthur Young in 1784⁶² publishing contributions relating to agricultural improvement of all kinds, much of it contributed by himself. The first volume was dated 1786, including material from some years earlier; and while there are some variations in the dating of volumes and contents, contributions were

⁶² See G. E. Mingay, "Young, Arthur (1741-1820)", ODNB. In early volumes the absence of a catchword indicates the end of one issue, although the following recto page usually carries no publishing details such as volume number, issue or date. While there are three volumes for 1793, there is only one for 1794, two for 1795, and three for 1796. The London Library hard copy, and the University of Chicago copy digitised for HathiTrust, appear to match in all respects; but it is likely that it was initially sold by issue, not volume.

mostly printed in chronological sequence. Discussion of agricultural labour, of pauperism, of nutrition would suddenly become common only during times of rural distress. However, the issues that were of concern were not necessarily those we might anticipate from later debate on pauperism. Vol. XXII (1794) for example includes a contribution on the “causes of the alarming increase of the poor-rates, those most discouraging checks to all agricultural improvements”:

I am of opinion that there is a radical evil in our present poor-laws, which, if not speedily removed, will, in many populous villages in this kingdom, be attended with utter ruin to the small farmers. The evil I mean to point at, is the almost irresistible power of the overseers in their respective parishes, who, in many instances, which come under my own immediate observation, are landholders, who have received no advantage from education, and who are by routine put into office from their large occupations.⁶³

And this criticism of the local administration of poor relief is one that would recur in the following three years; not any argument about the demands made upon poor relief by the poor, since the overwhelming majority of contributors would throughout 1795 propose means of ameliorating poverty *other than* through cash disbursements from the Poor Rate to individual claimants.

Although Vol. XXIV (1795) is the second volume for this year, it begins with the January 1795 average prices for corn.⁶⁴ Arthur Young included a ten-point questionnaire, dated 23 January 1795, relating to expressions of concern about a possible scarcity of provisions, covering: current stocks of wheat and rye relative to consumption until later in the year when the 1795 crop would be available; expectations (Young’s term) of the 1795 harvest, “relative to any deficiency which it is supposed may result from the autumnal rains and the present severe frost”; effective means for the relief of the poor; any increases in the pay of agricultural labour; the use of substitutes for wheaten bread; the present price of basic foodstuffs other than bread; the price of coal; the impact of the present frosts on fodder crops and young wheat; the price of hay and straw; and the price of wool.⁶⁵ Young subsequently printed seventy-nine responses⁶⁶ covering 268 pages, dated up to May but for the most part originating in February, suggesting that writers recognised the immediacy of the issues Young raised. There was general agreement that the 1795 wheat harvest was up to 30% reduced, and that there were only limited stocks in hand. Views were mixed on the coming harvest – some positive, others negative (in February). In virtually all cases “the poor” who were the object of concern were the working poor: males in regular employment but whose wages

⁶³ “On Poor Rates” Rev. W. Butts, 20 August 1793 *Annals* Vol. XXII (1794) pp. 45-51, here at p. 46.

⁶⁴ *Annals* Vol. XXIV pp. 38-39.

⁶⁵ *Annals* Vol. XXIV (1795) pp. 42-43. Minchinton, “Agricultural Returns”, pp. 31-32 reprints Young’s questionnaire verbatim, but does not discuss the response.

⁶⁶ I-V pp. 44-62; VI-XXIX pp. 73-181; XL-LXXI pp. 185-293; LXXII-LXXIX pp. 297-327.

were too low given the current price of grain. Charity and public subscription were considered to be the primary means of ameliorating their lot, either by subsidising the price of flour, through the establishment of soup kitchens, or by direct cash payments from charitable funds. One example stands for may:

In the parish where I live, besides the frequent and private donations of the well disposed, a sum of money has been raised, with which flour is purchased, and retailed to every poor family, consisting of both or either parent and two or more children, at the rate of half a peck, weekly, to each, and at the price of one shilling and ninepence per peck, or seven shillings the bushel. This relief is also extended to the aged and infirm widows; persons not included under the above description, are relieved, weekly, by the overseer. Our fund, which has now lasted nine weeks, will probably carry us, in these weekly sales, to the month of June; and then, if the price of wheat remains (as most probably it will) as high as at present, the same relief must be extended till after next harvest; for it is not unreasonable to insist, that the labourer, let his industry be what it may, cannot support himself and a large family, under the existing circumstances of scarcity.⁶⁷

While the writer's address implies wealth, he was local, and writes of local arrangements to which he was contributing. And this goes for many of Young's correspondents, to a greater or lesser degree.⁶⁸

In May Young summarised the responses he had received, taking each question in turn and reviewing the material by county. The first point that emerged was that the 1793 harvest had also been mostly deficient, so that in the summer of 1794 there were limited stocks in hand. He also emphasised the low rates of agricultural pay, and the advantages of piece rates – concluding that the increase of the Poor Rate reflected these low rates of pay. Few of his correspondents had in fact mentioned the Poor Rates, and Young dealt with the issue only in passing. Charitable giving was what he emphasised:

That the price has, for some months, been too high for the faculties of the poor cannot be doubted: charity, the most liberal and boundless, has done wonders for their assistance: it is however a reliance never to be desired; and that some legislative steps should be taken to procure a more enlarged supply, in future years, cannot be doubted.⁶⁹

Here he returned to his argument about “uncultivated land”, by which he meant waste, not fallow, land, also supporting the idea that the better exploitation of land would include more

⁶⁷ Lewis Majendie, Hedingham Castle (Essex) 24 March 1795, *Annals* Vol. XXIV (1795) p. 283.

⁶⁸ And indeed, some of the clergy whose correspondence was published in the *Annals* were involved with their local parish Poor Law administration, or drew on its recent history; this only points up the fact that Robert Malthus, a rural cleric preparing his essay about subsistence and the poor shortly afterwards, seems never to have informed himself of local conditions.

⁶⁹ *Annals* Vol. XXIV (1795) p. 346.

extensive common rights. While this was no doubt derived from observation on his travels, it is not a line of argument that more systematic modern research supports.⁷⁰

In July 1795 the Board of Agriculture circulated a note on “The Present Scarcity of Provisions” which recommended wholegrain rather than white wheaten bread, and the reduction of wheat consumption by the substitution of vegetables, plus admixture with other grains and potato flour. The information they collected was to be placed before Parliament, which should seek to prevent future scarcity by statutory means, securing for the people “a sufficient quantity of nourishing food, at a reasonable price.”⁷¹ This emphasis upon practical measures that might effect a speedy amelioration of the impact of high wheat prices is quite typical of views expressed in mid-1795. Volume XXV is dated 1796, but continues on directly for the summer of 1795, with two contributions advocating the cultivation of waste land as a remedy for high prices, and a letter from Sir John Sinclair recommending the cultivation of potatoes.⁷² In October 1795 Arthur Young published a second circular, to update responses earlier in the year but also adding a new question, seeking views on the regulation of wages according to the price of “bread corn”.⁷³ Responses initially focussed on the use of rice and potato as substitutes for wheat flour in the making of bread; some contributors noted the existence of supplementary wage payments; but striking in all of this discussion of wages, food substitutes, subsidies and soup kitchens, is the absence of any discussion of imports, their timing and impact upon prices. For his 1964 article on this period Walter Stern had searched through *The Times* newspaper for reports of both imports and the release of government stocks, concluding that their timing had a significant impact upon local fluctuations. There was however no discussion of this in the *Annals*, presumably because to do so would have opened up discussion of commercial matters, rather than those arising in the purely agrarian realm to which it was addressed.

During the autumn of 1795 the *Annals* printed a lengthy “Report on the Inquiry into the General State of the Poor” commissioned by Hampshire JPs. This began with a review of farm labour, distinguishing between three broad classes of worker: domestic servants, those who work by the piece, and the daily or weekly waged. The first were farm servants living-in as single adults, contracted annually and paid from £5 to £9 per year. This group was the best off, since they were usually at least well-fed. Those working by piece were said to be able to earn 12s. to 15s. a week in summer, and 10s. to 12s. in winter. The precarious position of the third group is marked: those working for daily or weekly wages while most likely supporting a

⁷⁰ Leigh Shaw-Taylor, “Parliamentary Enclosure and the Emergence of an English Agricultural Proletariat”, *Journal of Economic History* Vol. 61 (2001) pp. 640-62. His “Labourers, Cows, Common Rights and Parliamentary Enclosure: The Evidence of Contemporary Comments c.1760-1810”, *Past and Present* No. 171 (2001) pp. 95-126 is based upon a systematic analysis of the anecdotal evidence printed in the *Annals* 1784-1808.

⁷¹ “On the Present Scarcity of Provisions, by John Sinclair, Printed for and circulated by the Board of Agriculture”, 4 July 1795, *Annals* Vol. XXIV (1795) p. 581.

⁷² Since potatoes are sown in the spring for harvest through the summer this was not at the time a solution that would make any difference for at least a year.

⁷³ Dated 27 October 1795 - *Annals* Vol. XXV (1796) pp. 344-45.

family as well were paid around 8s. a week, recently increased in some places to 9s. Here the Report suggested that letting of cottages with small plots of land would be a significant improvement, although there is no mention of the work done by other members of the household that would have improved the very poor pay of a male agricultural day labourer.⁷⁴ Another problem identified is the reliance of such households on small shops; here it is recommended that as far as possible workers might be remunerated in kind, which would align more directly the interests of labourer and farmer. This leads on to wider issues of nutrition, one curious feature of which is an extended discussion of the deleterious effects of drinking tea as opposed to beer, arguing that “the obvious, the only remedy is the return to animal food and beer, those genuine supports of labour, of life, for which any other are vainly in effect, as cruelly in attempt, endeavoured to be substituted.”⁷⁵ The Report then goes on to consider health, “houses of industry” (workhouses), the training of boys and girls, and the proper use of the poor rate – primarily for the construction and maintenance of workhouses and associated provision for the training of juveniles. These were said to be “the chief means of reducing the poor rates”.⁷⁶ While there is little or no direct discussion of outdoor relief, it is once again evident from this report that “the poor” are identified with the “working poor”, the agricultural labour supplied by the three classes initially identified.

The final two hundred pages of Vol. XXV are dominated by the parliamentary proceedings of November and December 1795, beginning with a summary of the debate on 3 November 1795 in which Pitt, the Prime Minister, moved that a Select Committee on the high price of corn be formed, so that any measures taken were founded upon thorough investigation and deliberation. He also called for revision of the Assize of Bread to permit coarser flours to be used, or even maize and potato flours.⁷⁷ The following speaker blamed the present scarcity on large farmers who were able to hold back from selling their grain, whereas the small farmer was obliged “to sell his grain, at any price it will bring, at the proper season.”⁷⁸ To the cause of high prices he added the activities of corn jobbers and the practice of selling by sample – all arguments that were popular in the 1760s but which were largely absent from the *Annals* during 1795. Speaking in the same debate in response to Pitt, Charles Fox redirected the attention of the House to a failure of wages to keep up with prices, that in an “inclement season” the “industrious poor” were compelled to rely on the charity of the rich; although no form of coercion through the regulation of wages was thought appropriate, a principle with which Pitt agreed.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ *Annals* Vol. XXV pp. 354-58.

⁷⁵ “Report on the Inquiry into the General State of the Poor. Instituted by order of the last Epiphany General Quarter-Session for Hampshire”, *Annals* Vol. XXV (1796) pp. 349-98, here at p. 368.

⁷⁶ p. 398.

⁷⁷ “Scarcity of Provisions, House of Commons 3 November 1795”, *Annals* Vol. XXV (1796) pp. 420, 422.

⁷⁸ p. 427.

⁷⁹ p. 436.

Arthur Young commented at length on this, suggesting that the first task of the Select Committee was to familiarise itself with the facts:

The harvest was late, and little old stock on hand; the seed-time came suddenly with the rains, and the necessity of threshing one-tenth of the crop if it was an average one, or one-ninth or one-eighth if deficient, for seeding the ground, an operation not yet finished, must in the nature of things much impede the supply of the market, except for seed - wheat and rye. We see the effect of this in the price of barley, for all accounts from every part of the kingdom yet received by various persons agree that that crop was large; yet the price is very high, with the distillery stopped; this clearly and palpably proceeds from the threshers having been employed every where in threshing wheat-seed; till that is done, barley cannot, in the nature of things, fall to a price proportionate to the produce. In one month after wheat sowing is finished, this fact will be ascertainable. But the circumstance which most prevents the price from being a fair index of the crop, is alarm and apprehension of scarcity, which never fail raising the price much higher than the real deficiency of the crop would otherwise occasion. This was more apparent than in the preceding summer; when corn is rising with a general alarm, much is hoarded, in expectation of still higher prices. Men regret having sold too soon, and that induces others to keep back from market.⁸⁰

Here Young reviews many of the points made above in Section 1, his emphasis on expectations implying however that it was too soon to establish a Select Committee; that the government should first seek confidential information on the sources of foreign supply. Changes to the Assize should be made, he claimed that there was a surplus of horses that had to be fed (a pet theme), but most of all he recommended the enclosure of wasteland, his familiar argument.⁸¹

On 13 December 1795 the House of Commons returned to the issue, the *Annals* reporting on a speech by Lord Sheffield (The Bristol MP John Baker Holroyd). He lent support to the contention that by the time of the 1794 harvest the usual four or five months' stock in hand was almost exhausted, and far from the inventory being restored in 1795, that harvest was mostly very poor. While an abundant crop might more than meet consumption, Britain now consumed more grain than was produced in normal years, as demonstrated by the imports of the previous twelve years. His discussion of the possible source of imports, and the quantities required, stands in contrast to the arguments previously made by other *Annals* contributors, focussed more on charitable support to the poor either in money or in kind than on the fact that Britain was now a net importer of grain even in years of good harvests.

⁸⁰ "Political Remarks on the High Price of Corn", by "The Editor", 9 November 1795 pp. 449-72, here at pp. 451-52.

⁸¹ p. 456.

Channelling a line of argument that had occasionally surfaced in the *Annals*, on 9 December 1795 Samuel Whitbread had introduced a bill into the House that would enable JPs to regulate agricultural wages, an initiative that eventually went on to be defeated on 12 February 1796. The bill was presented not as an innovation, but as in the original Elizabethan spirit of the Poor Laws, which had aimed at fixing maximum, not minimum wages.⁸² Although Arthur Young and some of his contributors had earlier argued for the regulation of wages, 26 pages of responses published in the *Annals* from early January 1796 were mostly sceptical of Whitbread's proposal, echoing recent Parliamentary debate.⁸³ The argument that wages should be linked to average prices was complicated by the question of exactly when farmers sold their grain; hence to what extent farmers might benefit from high prices, and so could pass this on in the form of higher wages. There was however little information on this aspect of the present crisis besides anecdote. One such instance is that of Edmund Burke, who noted in his *Thoughts and Details* that in 1794-95 he had sold grain from his farm at £14 a load, thinking he had sold at the peak, which however then turned out to be later, when at the end of the season he could have got £30.⁸⁴ While Charles Smith had in 1766 raised this issue in his *Three Tracts* - how farm size dictated the speed at which harvested grain entered the market - this was not during 1795 addressed in the pages of the *Annals*. However, Smith's *Three Tracts* was republished in 1795;⁸⁵ and it was Charles Smith, not Adam Smith, who was later cited in a Select Committee report.

The Select Committee on High Prices established by Pitt quickly produced its first report, on 16 November. Having reviewed the information available, the Committee had quickly established that, while the 1795 harvest had overall been abundant, in the case of wheat it had been so poor as to require immediate remedy. The most obvious course was importation; but review of the possible foreign sources concluded that there was a general shortage, that it was doubtful whether the domestic deficiency could be quickly or easily resolved in this way. The committee went on to consider the alternatives of government purchase, and that of individual traders enjoying a bounty on imports, which would compensate merchants for the expense of shipping grain from the Mediterranean, where there was thought to be an adequate supply.⁸⁶ It was also reported that a considerable quantity of Indian Corn (maize) was available, and that offering a bounty on its importation would be of benefit. A Second Report followed shortly after, including rye in the proposed bounty payments and extending the period of time during which bounties would be paid.⁸⁷

⁸² Poynter, *Society and Pauperism*, pp. 56-57.

⁸³ *Annals* Vol. XXV (1796) pp. 473-506; Vol. XXVI (1796) pp. 1-26.

⁸⁴ Edmund Burke, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, 3rd edition, London 1800 p. 33.

⁸⁵ Appended to this edition was a House of Commons Committee Report on the methods practised in making flour from wheat, originally published in 1774, pp. 267-383.

⁸⁶ There was an extended discussion of the setting of the bounty: "First Report from the Select Committee Appointed to take into Consideration the present High Price of Corn", 16 November 1795 pp. 5-6. The Report ran to 7 pages.

⁸⁷ "Second Report from the Select Committee Appointed to take into Consideration the present High Price of Corn", 8 December 1795.

While this use of bounty payments to encourage imports was new, it was linked to the work of a parallel committee established to explore the issue of bringing waste land into cultivation. As already noted, this had long been advocated by Arthur Young, and the first report of this committee, largely written by Sir John Sinclair of the Board of Agriculture, repeated his arguments. The committee's terms of reference were limited to the means of bringing waste land into use,⁸⁸ and such reasons as were presented for so doing related to the provision of land to the rural poor, not directly the need to expand productive capacity. A later and more detailed report was reprinted in the *Annals* that looked forward to the end of the war, suggesting that

A disbanded fleet supplies our merchantmen with sailors, and may extend the fisheries on our coasts; but a disbanded army has hitherto had little resource, but emigration to our colonies, or to foreign countries, or resorting to manufactures, many of which require skill and experience in those who are employed in them. Since the introduction of machinery, however, great numbers of hands are less necessary for our manufactures than formerly; and thence the proper business for our disbanded soldiers would be the cultivation of the soil.⁸⁹

The same report did however address the issue that was the corollary of the proposal to offer a bounty for imports: that an import bounty was only necessary because of a failure to bring sufficient land into cultivation. There followed a calculation of the cumulative shortfall of cultivable land over the previous twenty years, concluding

From this account it appears, that 148,000 acres of additional cultivation, under these articles of produce, would have yielded the imported quantity; and consequently, that if such a breadth of waste land (capable of yielding these products) were in future to be added to the culture of the kingdom, there would not be a similar necessity for importation. Nor is that all: can any person doubt, that double the quantity of land wanted might be brought into cultivation, if the legislature would give such encouragement, or even permission, for that purpose. In that case, even in years of scarcity, there would be a sufficient quantity of grain for the consumption of the country; and in favourable seasons, there would be a considerable surplus, which, exported to other nations, would add to our commerce and our wealth.⁹⁰

In the Appendix to the Report, dealing with the import and export of grain, Charles Smith was named as an expert on this issue,⁹¹ his *Three Tracts on the Corn-Trade and Corn-Laws*

⁸⁸ "Select Committee Appointed to take into Consideration the Means of promoting the Cultivation and Improvement of the Waste, Unclosed, and Unproductive Lands of the Kingdom", 23 December 1795.

⁸⁹ "First Report From the Committee on Waste Lands pp. 498-542 undated [27 April 1797]", *Annals of Agriculture* Vol. XXVIII (1797) p. 514.

⁹⁰ *Annals* Vol. XXVIII pp. 519-20.

⁹¹ *Annals* Vol. XVIII p. 516ff. citing Report Appendix p. 136.

(1766) having advocated an analogous policy. He had then argued that the provision of an export bounty would encourage farmers to produce grain that might, in good years, exceed domestic demand, in this way securing a level of production that would in normal and poor years nevertheless be sufficient for domestic consumption. The willingness of parliamentarians to contemplate import bounties, a temporary measure for a problem that export bounties were intended to remedy, indicates why it was that Smith's text was reprinted in 1795.⁹² It should also be noted here that Charles Smith's advocacy of an export bounty was specifically rejected by Adam Smith in *Wealth of Nations* Book IV; that, more generally, the willingness of MPs to contemplate import bounties conflicted with what they would have been able to read in *Wealth of Nations*, a point that was not however raised by any speaker in this context.⁹³

Besides reprinting reports from the Select Committee on the Present High Price of Provisions, during the early months of 1796 the *Annals* printed contributions concerned with the organisation by individual parish or union of "houses of industry", taking their cue from a proposal by William Pitt.⁹⁴ There was a marked shift from the tenor of discussion a year earlier, when contributors wrote of charitable aid, of payment in kind, and the baking of bread with alternative contents. By June 1796 one contributor advocated the payment of outdoor relief to the industrious poor, while containing the indigent in workhouses:

So far the plan of the houses of industry is preferable; but it fails in forcing all claimants into one place, away from their homes and friends, and where they are maintained at a dearer rate than they could be by weekly allowances at their respective homes. The present disadvantage of such weekly allowances is, that more paupers will apply for them, than would be willing to go into a house of industry, and it is by this, that the chief saving of houses of industry is made; but then this saving is made in rather an unjust way, by forcing the quiet and industrious to be pinched at home, while the idle and vicious have no aversion to go into the house altogether. The directly contrary practice ought to take place, of keeping all the quiet and industrious out of the house, so long as they are willing to accept of such weekly allowances as the body of overseers judge to be sufficient relief to them; they would then never throw themselves into the house, except from the most absolute necessity: therefore every parish ought to have a small poor house, to receive such paupers i.e. sickly and old men and women, and orphan children, and to treat them

⁹² Printed by order of the Court of Aldermen, with an appendix pp. 268-383: "A Report from the Committee of the House of Commons, appointed to consider of the Methods practised in making Flour from Wheat; The Prices thereof; And how far it may be expedient to put the same again under the Regulations of an Assize".

⁹³ A digital search of all Parliamentary Papers 1776-1796 for Adam Smith as the author of *Wealth of Nations* yielded only five hits: 2 for 1792, 2 for 1793, and one for 1796.

⁹⁴ "Heads of a Bill for Amending and Enforcing the Laws for the Relief, Instruction and Employment of the Poor. Prepared according to the plan opened by Mr. Pitt, to the House of Commons, in the present session of Parliament", *Annals* Vol. XXVI (1796) pp. 260-92. Later Vol. XXX (1798) of the *Annals* contained 200 pages devoted to Jeremy Bentham's "Outline of a Work Called Pauper Management Improved", primarily concerned with the management of workhouses: pp. 89-176, 241-96, 393-424, 457-504, continued in Vol. XXXI.

well. But the idle and vicious, who are contented with nothing allowed to them, ought to be disposed of in another manner; that is, in every hundred one house should be hired or erected for those only, who are idle, vicious, stealers of gates and bars, thieves, beggars, impudent whores, the insolent and disorderly, where they should be kept to close labour and harder fare, under more rigorous rules, and by a different body of managers from the body of overseers, but chosen by the body of overseers in the several parishes; and no person to be sent there without a written order from a justice of peace, after his being thoroughly informed of their characters and conduct: these are the only persons who ought to be removed from their parishes, and this as a punishment to them.⁹⁵

Hence workhouses were to have a disciplinary role, but linked to outdoor relief for those willing to work, a line of argument endorsed in a series of letters later in the autumn of 1796, which concluded that

It is very evident, from this last change, and the general scope of your correspondent's letter, that this *workhouse*, to be used as a *house of correction*, is chiefly intended for such POOR as are not satisfied with the allowance which the body of *overseers*, under the proposed new organization, by a majority of votes, may be disposed to grant them; or such as the overseers shall not think proper to have any allowance.⁹⁶

Clearly by later 1796 attitudes to the poor were shifting, but this was only the beginning of a process that would be marked by Eden's *State of the Poor* in 1797, Malthus's *Essay on Population* in 1798, and his *Investigation of the Cause of the High Price of Provisions* in 1800. The high prices of the two harvest years 1794-96 moderated in the autumn of 1796; but at the same time the language used in discussion of poverty and pauperism became harsher. This would in the early 1800s intersect with the emergence of a new, doctrinaire, political economy, organised not around the nature and composition of national economic activity, knowledge of which was essential to counsel; but around a limited set of abstract principles, from which counsel could be deduced.

4. Edmund Burke's Counsel

By 1815 arguments about pauperism and the Poor Laws had merged with those over the regulation of the grain trade and the management of the Corn Laws, reframing debate in terms of the relationship between rent, wages and profit. How far the emergence of a new political economy actually illuminated these issues is not an issue with which we can deal here. We can simply note that the casuistic approach to problems of grain production and supply and the price of bread for working families typical in 1795 and early 1796 was

⁹⁵ "State of the Poor", Rev. Thomas Howes, Rector of Thorndon, Suffolk, 4th June 1796 *Annals* Vol. XXVII (1796) pp. 217-18.

⁹⁶ Capel Loft, Letter V 13 September 1796 *Annals* Vol. XXVII (1796) p. 450.

challenged by a new discourse based upon principles, on “theory”. As Ryan Walter has shown, during the mid-1790s “theory” had only a negative connotation.⁹⁷

Arthur Young expressed this very clearly in the context of the arguments we have been considering:

If the price of corn regulates the price of everything else, as has been contended, the result ought to have been fatal to our exports; but *experience* is a better master than *theory*: and here we find that, on the contrary, never have our manufactures been more flourishing, nor our commerce more extensive, than just in the very period when this prodigious rise of 81 per cent in bread corn ought, according to the principles of those writers, to have absolutely annihilated both. So very young are we in the science of politics; and so little dependence can we have on theories, built on any other basis than the only solid one of *fact* and *experience*.⁹⁸

Young is here expressing a view that Walter links with Edmund Burke's rhetoric and his views on the construction of sound arguments; but in recent years commentary on Burke has also sought to emphasise Burke's filiation with the arguments of “political economy”, understood as doctrine. The chief text at issue is his *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*,⁹⁹ published posthumously in 1800 but composed in 1795, consisting of two distinct parts: his advice to Pitt in November 1795 regarding the high price of grain and its impact upon the poor; and fragments of a draft letter to Arthur Young, possibly prompted to comment on the present crisis in the same way that so many contributors to the *Annals* had been.

By way of conclusion we can assess the status of the arguments expressed in *Thoughts and Details* in the light of those made by Burke's contemporaries, as outlined above; and also in terms of our argument that in 1795 the new discourse of political economy had not yet fully formed. We will show that there is no plausible linkage between *Thoughts and Details* and what soon afterwards became known as political economy. We will outline the arguments advanced in support of a linkage of Burke to political economy; then consider the arguments Burke advanced in 1795 as compared with those we have found in *Annals of Agriculture* for the same period, and which address the same substantive issues.

We here use the term “political economy” in a very specific, doctrinal sense; contemporary usage did not (yet) associate the term with any particular body of “theory”. While Adam Smith did use the term “political oeconomy” in the title to Book IV of the *Wealth*

⁹⁷ Ryan Walter, *Before Method and Models. The Political Economy of Malthus and Ricardo*, Oxford University Press, New York 2021.

⁹⁸ [Arthur Young] “Recapitulation of Answers to the Circular Letter on the Scarcity of Corn”, 1 May 1796 *Annals* Vol. XXVI (1796) pp. 472-73.

⁹⁹ Edmund Burke, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity, Originally presented to the Rt. Hon. William Pitt, in the Month of November, 1795*, London 1800. For a summary of recent writing related to this see Sora Sato, “Edmund Burke's Political Economy: A Historiographical Essay”, *History of Political Economy* Vol. 54 (2022) pp. 801-12.

of Nations, this was a pejorative usage most likely angled against Sir James Steuart, who in his *Principles of Political Economy* (1767) was one of the very first users of the term in English, a neologism borrowed from the contemporary French *économie politique*. This did not however denote doctrine, as it would by the early 1800s, but policy. Smith himself never described *Wealth of Nations* as a book written in the genre of political oeconomy, although the term was coming into relatively common use by the 1780s as a general designation of policy, as in the French usage. Most striking is that a search of the Kress/Goldsmiths digital collection turns up only three instances of “political economist” before 1800, all in the 1790s, whereas use of the term snowballed shortly afterwards.¹⁰⁰

John Pocock noted the “varying degrees of specificity” of usage in his essay on Burke and the French Revolution. “Political economy” could for example be used for “either the emerging science of the ‘wealth of nations’ or the policy of administering the public revenue.”¹⁰¹ This was however prefaced by a remark that this was the way “political economy” had been used at the time – which is true only for the last third of the century, and not before. The meaning of political economy that Pocock favoured was a more general one, never employed as such at the time: “a more complex, and more ideological, enterprise aimed at establishing the moral, political, cultural, and economic conditions of life in advancing commercial societies”. This, he thought, could also be described as a commercial humanism which met the challenge posed by civic humanism to the “quality of life in such societies”. It would have been better had he stuck with “commercial humanism”. This would clearly be a legitimate and convenient historical construct upon contemporary usage, whereas use of “political economy” involves exactly the same kind of anachronism that has recruited eighteenth century writers on policy as the forerunners and anticipators of modern economic science, their work then being evaluated in its terms. Most of all, it was the construction in the early 1800s of a new doctrine of political economy that demolished the project of “commercial humanism” to which Pocock alludes, creating an ambiguity in modern usage that conceals the radical break that it represented. To link Burke to “political economy” in the sense generally understood today implies an endorsement of the very “theory” that Burke and his peers rejected.

Richard Bourke’s recent monumental study of Burke’s politics has very little to say about any connection with political economy, being organised chronologically around his political career, chiefly conceived as a parliamentary life registered in speeches, letters and writings. Bourke’s discussion of the political and economic context in 1795 is quite brief, the connection made to Adam Smith retreating into the generalities of natural jurisprudence, rather than any examination of what Smith had to say about the circumstances and interests that governed

¹⁰⁰ 44 hits for texts published 1800-1809; 116 for 1810-1819; and 287 for 1820-1829. There were no hits at all for “political oeconomist”. Searching digitised eighteenth century texts is not an exact science by any means, but these results are suggestive.

¹⁰¹ J. G. A. Pocock, “The Political Economy of Burke’s Analysis of the French Revolution”, in his *Virtue, Commerce, and History. Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985 p. 194.

markets.¹⁰² He does acknowledge Donald Winch's discussion of the putative Burke-Smith relationship, although not its sceptical tone.¹⁰³ Winch does what he can with *Thoughts and Details*, pointing to its deficiencies, while his examination of Burke's supposed debt to Smith is likewise negative.¹⁰⁴ This path is retraced by Ryan Walter,¹⁰⁵ but identifying the construction and function of Smith's analysis in Books I and II of *Wealth of Nations*: the nature of, and relationship between, productive and unproductive labour, and the central role of capital, its employment and supervision. It can then be demonstrated how little Burke's own account of prices, wages and consumption owes to any arguments made by Adam Smith, that only a superficial similarity between Burke and Smith's treatment of wage formation has licensed a reading of Burke as though he were a market theorist.¹⁰⁶

In 1800 the posthumous publication of *Thoughts and Details* came with an editorial preface that not only explained its construction from two separate texts, but which emphasised that Burke had been a diligent student of "Agriculture, and the commerce connected with, and dependent upon it", "one of the most considerable branches of political economy". Hence the editor is placing Burke according to recent usage that has little connection with Smith, and none with political economy as "theory". But as is evident from the contributions to *Annals of Agriculture*, many of which could be described in the same terms, their response to high prices and pauperism were in the course of 1795 pragmatic and situational: they make little or no use of "principles". Nor do they invoke any authorities, least of all Adam Smith. The practice of composing theoretical treatises on economic matters had not yet developed, so there were no authorities that could have been invoked. Smith's own views on the grain trade, his opposition to export bounties, was itself founded upon his appreciation of the relatively stable conditions during the first half of the eighteenth century. There was little in *Wealth of Nations* that might provide worthwhile counsel for any policy regarding the turbulence of the 1790s.

For our purposes there is little need to discriminate between those parts of *Thoughts and Details* composed as counsel for William Pitt, and those drafted for correspondence with Arthur Young. We are interested in the kind of arguments Burke made regarding contemporary conditions, and while his counsel to Pitt would have taken account of Pitt's

¹⁰² Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke*, Princeton University Press, Princeton N.J. 2015 Ch. 16.5 pp. 886-99; here at p. 890.

¹⁰³ Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, p. 889 fn. 323; see also p. 653 fn. 169.

¹⁰⁴ Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty. An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750-1834*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996 Ch. 8. Richard Whatmore's "Burke on Political Economy", in David Dunn, Christopher Insole (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012 pp. 80-91 is more about the general European political and economic context than any specific body of doctrine.

¹⁰⁵ Ryan Walter, "Conservative Politics and Laissez-Faire Economics? The Burke-Smith Problem Revisited", *Critical Historical Studies* Vol. 7 No. 2 (2020) pp. 276-80.

¹⁰⁶ Walter, "Conservative Politics", p. 285: a perspective informing G. M. Collins, *Commerce and Manners in Edmund Burke's Political Economy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020, where for instance Burke is described as having a "theory of political economy" in which he embraces the "fundamental principles of supply and demand" – p. 82.

position as Prime Minister, this did not modify the analysis upon which the counsel was based. We can briefly review the various propositions that he advances, checking their alignment with his contemporaries, and registering the source of any variation.

The first point concerns his conception of “the poor”. It is clear that for contributors to the *Annals* in 1795 “the poor” were chiefly agricultural labourers on fixed wages that were inadequate for the purchase of sufficient amounts of their basic food, wheaten bread. Burke’s impassioned rejection of the “political canting language, ‘The Labouring Poor’”,¹⁰⁷ simply marks his detachment from the contemporary view that agricultural wages were too low to properly support any family, and that the irregularities of seasonal labour exacerbated this problem. That “Patience, labour, sobriety, frugality, and religion”¹⁰⁸ was appropriate advice to the poor was not a view widely shared in the pages of the *Annals*. No especially sophisticated analysis is needed to understand this. That the poor insisted on “bread made with the finest flour, and meat of the first quality”¹⁰⁹ was proof of their recalcitrance as far as Burke was concerned. That the poor were better off in the 1790s than they had been “50 or 60 years ago” is also a questionable observation.

As for wages, Burke maintains that “It is not true that the rate of wages has not encreased with the nominal price of provisions. I allow it has not fluctuated with that price, nor ought it...”.¹¹⁰ As is evident from Section 2, given the rise in price through the summer of 1795, and the continuing rise after the harvest, this together amounted to several months of high prices, and so from the point of view of the labouring poor was more than a merely passing phenomenon. But Burke goes on from this to assert that “Labour is a commodity like every other, and rises or falls according to the demand. ... They bear a full proportion to the result of their labour”.¹¹¹ While this may appeal to a theorist, as recent research has shown many occupations, including agricultural labour, were characterised by wage rigidity; indeed, it was for this reason that the argument was advanced during 1795 that JPs should set agricultural wages, as in Whitbread’s December 1795 Bill.

The text then switches to a section taken from the draft letter to Young that articulates the assumptions in the foregoing about the wage relation, and the way in which wages were set.

There is an implied contract, much stronger than any instrument or article of agreement, between the labourer in any occupation and his employer – that the labour, so far as that labour is concerned, shall be sufficient to pay to the employer a profit on his capital, and a compensation for his risk: in a word,

¹⁰⁷ *Thoughts and Details*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁸ p. 4.

¹⁰⁹ p. 5.

¹¹⁰ p. 5.

¹¹¹ p. 6.

that the labour shall produce an advantage equal to the payment. Whatever is above that, is a direct tax; and if the amount of that tax be left to the will and pleasure of another, it is an arbitrary tax.¹¹²

While the reasoning employed here might be familiar to a Chicago law and economics professor, this legalistic, not economic, framework was not one that had any precedent in what passed for late eighteenth century political economy. Furthermore, Burke continues to reason as a theorist:

The vulgar error on this subject arises from a total confusion in the very idea of things widely different in themselves; - those of convention, and those of judicature. When a contract is making, it is a matter of discretion and of interest between the parties. In that intercourse, and in what is to arise from it, that parties are the masters. If they are not completely so, they are not free, and therefore their contracts are void.¹¹³

And he goes on:

But in the case of the farmer and the labourer, their interests are always the same, and it is absolutely impossible that their free contracts can be onerous to either party. It is the interest of the farmer, that his work should be done with effect and celerity: and that cannot be, unless the labourer is well fed, and otherwise found with such necessaries of animal life, according to it's habitudes, as may keep the body in full force, and the mind gay and cheerful. ... It is therefore the first and fundamental interest of the labourer, that the farmer should have a full incoming profit on the product of his [the agricultural labourer's] labour.¹¹⁴

That any of this lacks any resemblance to the casuistry of Adam Smith is something that should be immediately obvious; but the canonical status of Edmund Burke has led commentary to take such connections seriously. When set against contemporary conditions and commentary these are clearly the ramblings of a very unwell man, as Arthur Young reported on visiting him.

There are two points that arise from this discussion of the wages and the wage contract: first of all, Burke employs a legal framework that in the circumstances amounts to "theory". This "theory" is then recognised by modern commentators because they are familiar with this kind of argument from the nostrums advanced in the teaching today of elementary economics. But this was not the kind of "theory" that actually developed in the early nineteenth century, whose focus was on the rate of profit and the distribution of the product of labour between landlords, [capitalist] farmers and labourers. Arnold Toynbee had somewhat

¹¹²pp. 6-7.

¹¹³p. 8.

¹¹⁴pp. 10-11.

fancifully identified Ricardo with the idea of “competition”, whereas Ricardo stated very clearly in the “Preface” to his *Principles of Political Economy* that the chief object of political economy was distribution (of the revenues flowing to labourers, farmers and landlords), centred upon the evolution of the rate of profit. In any case, Burke is supposed to have been an opponent of “theory”; but *Thoughts and Details* is suffused with theoretical rhetoric.

Secondly, the “political economy” of the later 1790s was not like this. While perhaps not so elevated as implied by Pocock’s conception of “commercial humanism”, the contemporary understanding of “political economy” remained a knowledge of commerce, industry and agriculture that facilitated pragmatic counsel on the pursuit of policy. In this sense, the contributors to the *Annals of Agriculture* were “political economists”; but within ten years they would be supplanted by a new brand of theorists who offered imaginary solutions to the problems of dearth and high prices.

More generally, the period we have been studying, 1794-96, is “before political economy” in the sense that it antedates Malthus’s *Essay on Population* (1798), his *Investigation of the Present High Price of Provisions* (1800), of Bentham and Eden on the Poor Laws, before the publication of Burke’s *Thoughts and Details*; at the point just before doctrine would supplant casuistry in the writings of those who are now regarded as canonical writers. But as we have seen, the non-canonical figures debating local and national policy at the time had no specific principles to hand with which they might approach these matters, besides citing previous occasions of dearth and plenty, and surmising their causes and consequences. Added to that, the “Smith” who might have been cited as an authority at this time was Charles, not Adam. Even the discussion of enclosure, which became a live issue in the pages of the *Annals* towards the end of the decade, was at this time little more than an enthusiasm of Arthur Young, linked to his advocacy of the cultivation of waste land. Nor do we find discussion of the Corn Laws, besides the proposal that a remedy for present shortage could be supplied by a bounty on imports. In 1799 and 1800 the wheat harvest would fail even more badly than in 1794 and 1795, and then again in 1811 and 1812. This led to further proposals to revise the Corn Laws. The Parliamentary debates over this in February 1815, today associated with the rent theory of Malthus and Ricardo, occurred almost a year after the defeat of Napoleon in April 1814, and presuming that the Napoleonic Wars were over, looked forward to a new postwar settlement, not back to problems of wartime supply. Except of course that Napoleon escaped from Elba on 26 February 1815, after the main debate was concluded, and the wars did not finally come to an end until June 1815. While we now know that these debates took place during an interlude, not following a conclusion, our knowledge of this itself obscures the context in which this key element of the new political economy emerged.

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