

## British farmers and the public sphere, 1815-1914

by R. W. Hoyle

One of the many points at which British rural history differs from that of its continental neighbours (and, indeed, Ireland) is the lack of a farmers' party in nineteenth-century politics. One key point (from which the rest of this paper might be deemed to follow) comes from the fact that most English and Scottish farmers were tenants and not freeholders. In fact the number of independent tenants probably continued to diminish until late in the century.<sup>1</sup> Farmers strangely stood aside from politics. Their political ambitions as a lobby were normally subsumed in the landlord's party, the Conservatives, even though there were moments at which it is clear that the agenda of the farmers is not that of their landlords. For instance, the alliance of landlord and farmer may have had the effect of retarding the achievement of a statutory basis for the compensation of tenant's improvements for most of 40 years.<sup>2</sup> It is not until the first decade of the twentieth century that a farmers' organisation emerges on a national scale, and whilst this initially had parliamentary ambitions, it was frankly too late, after the introduction of the universal male franchise and single-member constituencies in 1884, for a farmer's parliamentary party to emerge.<sup>3</sup> So much would be widely accepted by British Historians. In this paper we ask why a farmer's political party might not have merged earlier, and whilst perhaps not fully answering the question on this occasion, we at least pose the question of how far farmers contributed to the public sphere in the nineteenth century. To what degree can a distinctive farmer's voice be heard in politics, and how did that voice grow and change over the century? Where and how often do we find the farmer's voice articulating the farmers' point of view? Along the way we will show how the farmer's voice was often systematically suppressed by the landlord interest, but also how the prudent the

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<sup>1</sup> The figures for 1887 for England and Wales (the first years for which the agricultural census collected data on tenancy), 81.6 per cent of agricultural holdings were tenanted and 3.9 per cent part tenanted. In Scotland the percentages were 92.1 per cent and 0.5 per cent. *A Century of agricultural statistics* (1966), Tables 10 and 12.

<sup>2</sup> See here R. J. Olney, *Lincolnshire politics, 1832-1885* (1973): the Lincolnshire farmers 'suffered from Conservatism almost as an occupational disease. They seemed to inhale it from the very furrows they ploughed'.

<sup>3</sup> By the early twentieth century the recognition that their interests were not the same took institutional form with the formation of the Lincolnshire Farmers Union in 1904 (which became the National Farmers Union in 1908) and the Central Land Association (the forerunner of the Country Landowners Association) in 1907. For the early history of the NFU, Graham Cox, Philip Lowe and Michael Winter, 'The origins and early development of the National Farmers Union', *AgHR* 39 (1991), pp. 30-47 and J. Brown, 'Agricultural policy and the National Farmers' Union, 1908-1939', in Wordie (ed.), *Agriculture and politics in England*, pp. 178-98

Conservatives were in trying to keep the alliance between landlords and tenants alive and flexible. Hence we shall shed light on the nature of the power relationship between landlord and tenant. When this broke down, as it did in a number of places on a number of occasions, the sheer number of farmers – and the larger farming interest of occupations and services – allowed farming MPs to emerge. Whilst some of this account is familiar, what is new is the use of the newly digitised newspapers and early Victorian periodicals which are now throwing up a mass of material which the single scholar, combing the pages of the press by eye, could never find. So, this is, I hope, a novel but interim discussion of nineteenth-century farmers in politics.

For the most part in the nineteenth-century, it was held by both landlords and farmers that they formed a single interest. Hence we have the toast drunk at dinners on the Holkham estate, ‘A good understanding between landlord and tenant’. At a meeting of the Watford District Agricultural Association in 1833, the toast ‘Liberal landlords and grateful tenants’ was proposed and ‘received with marked applause’.<sup>4</sup> In its best forms, the relationship was a social but naturally paternalist one. Landlords often relied for their rents on the success of relatively few tenants, many of whom had held their farms for decades, perhaps generation after generation: the ‘understanding’ might almost be hereditary. Landlords had to be concerned about the capacity of their tenants to pay their rents, and might have to nurse them through poor seasons with rent rebates or simply accepting that tenants could not bring all their rent forwards on the rent day but needed to have time to realise money. There might also (as we shall see) be a degree of social contract between landlords and tenants in tenant’s dinners and through the early agricultural societies and their dinners (although these may have been highly structured occasions). But as Susanna Wade Martins has shown in her account of two farmers on the famous Holkham estate in Norfolk, even T. W. Coke’s tenants expected to have dealings with him directly as well as dealing with him through his steward.

One dimension of this relationship was exhibited by the confidence that tenants showed in their landlords by holding their farms at will, without any formal lease. That this was so in the nineteenth century might come as surprise to those versed in the literature of the eighteenth century. The leading agronomists, particularly Arthur Young, all saw the lease (21 years being usual in England) as being one of the key elements that allowed improvement. It gave the tenant the security to invest in his property. Of course

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<sup>4</sup> Susanna Wade Martins, ‘Farmers of the Holkham estate’, in R. W. Hoyle (ed.), *The farmer in England, 1650-1970* (2013), p. 193; *Morning Post* 23 Sept. 1833.

he knew what an important aspect of his outgoings – his rent – was during his lease whilst the landlord could judge his income. The eighteenth-century agronomists also tended to argue that one of the reasons for the backwardness of Scotland and the continental nations was the lack of leases, and so the insecurity of farmers, and their vulnerability to sudden increases in rents provoked by their own investments. Nineteenth-century commentators such as Caird continued to advocate leases for the environment they created, but both tenants and landlords preferred to avoid leases. For lords, there were lessons to be learned from their inability to capture the high farming profits of the Napoleonic wars: they saw profits flowing overly to their tenants. In the post-war depression tenants were reluctant to be tied down to fixed rents running far into the future. And so at the same Watford dinner in 1833, the toast was made to ‘Long leases and good tenants’. The *Morning Post* reported how

Upon this toast an argumentative conversation arose upon the probable advantage or disadvantage of long leases in the result to landlord and tenant. The nearly general conclusion seemed to be, considering the possible vicissitudes of agricultural interests for the next few years, that renting with three years notice to quit would be preferable to long lease certain.<sup>5</sup>

Tenancy at will (which is what was being advocated here) only gave the tenant six month’s notice. This was extended to a year’s notice by statute of 1875. What the diners in Watford thought best to advance their interest was not what the law provided for at the time – or later.

The use of tenancy at will or annual licences left tenants vulnerable. They could be dismissed from their tenancies by capricious landlords and as we shall see, this certainly did happen from time to time. More especially, their widows could be evicted. Nicola Verdon has recently shown how estates were often reluctant to allow the widows of farmers to continue in their husband’s tenancies even as a stopgap whilst a son came of age. There may well have been doubts about whether the widow could manage ‘to make the rent’, but the objection was also made that women farming did not have the vote, and so a woman tenant brought a cost to the estate in his political guise.<sup>6</sup> A partial solution to the proliferation of annual tenancies was the development of tenant right, a system by which the outgoing tenant was compensated for ‘unexhausted improvements’ which might be buildings, fences or hedges or investments such as orchards, but also standing crops, marling and manuring, all investments which could be depreciated over a period of

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<sup>5</sup> *Morning Post* 23 Sept. 1833.

<sup>6</sup> N. Verdon, ‘The “Lady Farmer”: gender, widowhood and farming in Victorian England’, in Hoyle (ed.), *The farmer in England*, pp.245-7.

years. Tenant right only had customary standing though. Moves to place it on a statutory footing in 1848 came to nothing, being opposed by the landlord interest, and it was not until the Agricultural Holdings Acts of 1875 that an attenuated form of the custom was given legal standing. Landlords had to opt into the 1875 act: it was a later act, of 1883, which made the compensation for improvements compulsory (and left landlords vulnerable to high costs as farmers gave up their tenancies in the depressed years of the 1880s and 1890s).

On the other hand, a tenant who was evicted from his farm because he had crossed his lord might be hard to replace. Tenants who might otherwise be interested in the farm might well feel that the ‘understanding’ between landlord and tenant that they looked for was lacking in this case, and might take their capital elsewhere. Tenants were not without weapons especially when agriculture was in depression. Occasional episodes of tenant solidarity are found.<sup>7</sup>

The relationship between landlord and tenant was not merely a rent-paying one. Larger farmers had the vote. The 1832 Reform Act extended the franchise to tenants paying £50 or per annum. Landlords, certainly in the eighteenth-century, saw their tenants’ votes as a species of property to be used on their behalf: one of our concerns is to show how this view diminished in the nineteenth century but had not entirely disappeared by the time of the introduction of the secret ballot in 1872 which made the landlord’s supervision of his tenant’s voting impossible.<sup>8</sup> Before the secret ballot polling in elections was a public matter. Landlords and their agents could observe how tenants voted. Indeed, poll books were printed up and circulated so that a landlord could have a permanent and authoritative record of how his tenants had voted.<sup>9</sup>

## I

The eighteenth century should not be seen as a time of uncomplicated tenant deference. Hainsworth has given us examples of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century landowners who believed their tenants were at their command, and even, in the case of Lord Fitzwilliam, the tradesmen with whom he had dealings. We have the off-cited

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<sup>7</sup> See here the reports of a group of 27 Shropshire farmers who decided how they would vote in 1832: if any one of them was served with notice to quit his farm, all the others mutually promised to leave their farms too. *Morning Chronicle* 8 Sept. 1832, reprinting a report in the *Shrewsbury Chronicle*.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, Verdon quotes Barbara Leigh Smith on the eviction of women for electoral reasons, but Leigh Smith was writing in 1866.

<sup>9</sup> It also needs to be explained here that county seats before 1884 generally had two members so each voter had two votes, which made for some complicated management of the election

example of Robert Walpole's tenants riding as a group to vote at Norwich in 1715 with trumpeters before them and a wagon carrying the infirm and a four-gallon barrel of brandy for the party's sustenance. Early eighteenth-century politics could be intensely partisan. Colley reports the instance of a disabled woman in receipt of a pension from the Wynn family who was evicted by them when she was seen giving verbal support to Wynn's opponent in the 1722 county election.<sup>10</sup> But as Hainsworth shows, most landowners approached their tenants with more subtlety than this and had to acknowledge that they had opinions and even rights: so in 1722 some Nottinghamshire voters could 'assert that it was "oppression and arbitrary for the landlords to compel them to vote contrary to their inclination and take away the liberty allowed to them as subjects of having a free vote in the choice of members of parliament"'.<sup>11</sup>

The spirit of independence is seen in the four-handed 'Dialogue between a landlord, [his] tenant, the tenant's wife and his son' circulated in January 1734 and copied at length by Peter Walkden into his diary.<sup>12</sup> The landlord approaches his tenant to say that the gentlemen of the county had agreed to nominate 'Mr Ch. and Mr Cr.', for whom he desires the tenant's vote.

Tenant: ... Pray, by what law do you chose for us freeholders, who are of age and ability to choose for ourselves ...

Landlord: I have a right to your vote, as you are my tenant and live in my house and on my land.

Tenant: And, Sir, may not I say, I have a right to your vote, as I am one of those tenants who help you keep your house, and maintain your grandeur. The house and land are mine for three lives, on a valuable consideration paid: Witness my lease, in which is no clause obliging me to trudge to the city at every election to poll for my lord's man ... we the freeholders, dependent and independent in this hundred have met and agreed to set up Sir Robert, and I hope you'll favour him with your interest.

Landlord: 'tis true, you paid me for your land, but I have not sold my property.

Tenant, indeed sir, you have sold your property and all your right and title to it for three lives. If I live upon your land, you live upon my money ... .

Landlord: I do insist upon it, and if you deny me, I'll set a mark upon your lease ...

Tenant: ... I am resolved to try lives with you and I have three good ones and hope none of them will go to heaven before my landlord.

Landlord: you are very saucy and deserve to be caned for your insolence.

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<sup>10</sup> Linda Colley, *In defence of oligarchy. The Tory Party, 1714-60* (1982), p. 148.

<sup>11</sup> D. R. Hainsworth, *Stewards, lords and people. The estate steward and his world in later Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1992), ch. 7, the Nottinghamshire quotation from p. 148; Sir John Plumb, *The growth of political stability in England, 1675-1725* (London, 1967), p. 46.

<sup>12</sup> Chipping Local History Society, *Walkden Diary*, pp. 411-14.

The banter between the two continues and develops into a discussion of liberty and property (represented by Walpole, where the landlord's nominees are dismissed as a 'quondam excise man' and a 'beardless bully'). The landlord, loosing face as well as ground, retorts 'To be short, I'll be obeyed or your family shall suffer at the next leasing'. The tenant's wife asks an apparently innocent question about what is meant by a 'free election' opening the way for the accusation that the landlord was trying to enslave his tenants by having them surrender their free rights. The dialogue ends with the tenant's wife saying 'Fear no[t] husband: for our landlord will be dead or in a better humour before the next leasing: so say my stars'. One hopes he was. Whether any tenants really engaged their landlords in such vigorous defence of their right to electoral independence might be doubted, but the dialogue clearly envisages that such a thing was possible *at that time*, that tenants might be politically alert and willing to cross their landlords in defence of their principles.

O'Gorman has cautioned against the view that tenants were invariably deferential in later eighteenth-century elections.<sup>13</sup> They needed to be handed carefully and their votes solicited. They were capable of making fine judgements between candidates. Heavy-handed tactics could be damaging. The allegation that a landlord had threatened to terminate a lease rattled round the 1818 election in Wiltshire. Polls were often avoided after a candidate's canvass found he was in a loosing position. Coke of Holkham was so unconfident that his tenants would vote the way he wished that in 1817 his agent ordered that they were to supervised from leaving their farms to casting their votes. And yet there were heavy-handed tactics used right up to and beyond the Great Reform Act of 1832 and beyond. The Earl of Northumberland circulated a petition against the Reform Bill in 1831 and instructed his tenants to sign it. His bailiffs were to return to him the names of those tenants who 'presume to think for themselves and refuse to sign'. The Northumberland tenants, it might be noted, were reported to hold by yearly leases, and it was estate policy to turn the widows of tenants off their husband's farms.<sup>14</sup>

There remained an expectation - perhaps seen here in an extreme form - that the votes of the tenants of landlords were a species of property and available for them to call on for their own candidates as they chose. Where voters chose to vote against their landlord's instructions - they ran the risk of receiving a notice to quit from their landlord.

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<sup>13</sup> |For the following, Frank O'Gorman, *Voters, patrons and parties. The unreformed electoral system of Hanoverian England, 1734-1832* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 238-44.

<sup>14</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, 6 Apr. 1831.

There are a handful of instances, notably in small borough constituencies, where landlords exercised what they considered to be their right to expel tenants who voted contrary to their line. Amongst the most notorious was Newark in 1829 where the Fourth Earl of Newcastle issued notices to a large number of tenants who voted contrary to his instructions in 1829, in Hertford in 1831, Warwick in 1834, Stamford in 1837 and Woodstock at the end of the decade. Allegations of this sort of heavy handed electoral management were even made against Sir Robert Peel at Tamworth. There are doubtless a more instances waiting to be found. In all of these cases large numbers of notices to quit were issued although how far of them were followed through to forcing the tenants from their houses and property is not presently known. Nonetheless the power to give notice to quit could be used against individuals who crossed their land., The press reported how, in 1832, two candidates addressed the crowd from the windows of the Salisbury Arms, in Hertford. a rival candidate was allowed to watch the meeting from the upper windows of a house opposite. As a reward for this courtesy, the owner of the house was given notice to quit.

But these were urban shopkeepers, artisans and the like and not farmers, and perhaps dispensable in a way in which farmers were not. A correspondent in the *Leicester Chronicle* in 1830 observed that the time had passed when landlords could evict tenants for not voting in their approved fashion simply because it was hard for landlords to replace an errant tenant with a new one ‘at an equally extravagant rent’.<sup>15</sup> In this context we might consider a dialogue published in a radical magazine in 1821 which contrasted the changing fortunes of landlord and tenant between 1818 and 1822, but also reveals how the tenant’s political preferences were thwarted by landlords.<sup>16</sup> The context is Norfolk. In 1818 the tenant comes to see the landlord at his request. ‘The tenant enters, bowing. The landlord inclines his head without rising from his chair’.

L[andlord]. Oh!, Mr S. I told my steward to order you to come that I might speak with you. I have been informed that you have talked of voting for Mr Coke at the approaching election, if there be a contest for the country. Is this true Sir?  
T[enant ].Why your honour, I may have said that I thought Mr Coke would be a better member for us than Mr Wodehouse because he is for Parliamentary Reform and that I should like to vote for him.

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<sup>15</sup> ‘The time is past, and the day is now gone by, when the tenant need fear the power of the landlord, or a notice to quit ..... [L]andlords have now found the difficulty of getting tenants and therefore know better than get rid of an old one when they cannot get a new one at an equally extravagant rent’. ‘True Blue’, General election - county representation’, *Leicester Chronicle*, 24 July 1830.

<sup>16</sup> *The Political Examiner*, 24 June 1821.

L: Oh! you did, did you! though you knew that I declared my determination to turn every tenant out of his farm who had voted for Mr Coke; so my steward will immediately serve you with notice to quiet.

T: I hope your lord will not be hard with me. My father and I have been upon the farm for more than 70 years; and I should be sorry to leave it for a trifle. I have always paid my rent regularly; and i shall be hardly out to maintain my wife and children if I go out.

L: A trifle do you call it? Has not Mr Coke always opposed the ministers who have raised this country to the highest pitch of glory and have brought it to its present unexpired state of happiness and prosperity? Mr Coke is little better than that fellow Sir Francis Burdett who is a demagogue and a Jacobin and a Leveller and deserves to be hanged

With which the landlord brings the interview to an end, telling the tenant to ‘that unless you satisfy [the steward] about your vote, you shall go out’, and the tenant leaves promising to vote for Wodehouse and harbouring a resentment against the way he has been treated.

In 1822 the circumstances are different. The tenant is meeting his landlord at his own request. The tenant ‘enters – his landlord is sitting pensively in his arm chair – he rises and advances towards the tenant’.

L: I am glad to see you Mr S. (To the servant). Thomas, set a chair for Mr S. (To the tenant). How do Mrs S and the children?

Not well is the answer. Times are hard, prices low and after politely denouncing the government, the tenant gets to the point: he has come to give up his farm.

L: Oh! Don’t say so Mr S. I should be sorry to part with you and very unwilling to look for another tenant.

T: Why, Sir, as to looking for another tenant, I believe that that would be useless; I don’t think that any body could do himself any good even if he had the farm rent free.

L: (with a still more gloomy countenance). You are joking, my good Mr S. I cannot part with you as a tenant: you must not think of leaving the farm.

T: why, Sir, I was born in the place, and have been so long in it, that I am main loath to quit it, and would therefore give more for it than any other man, but If I do stay I must have great abatement of rent.

In the following conversation it transpires that the tenant has already had his rent of £400 reduced by £200: now he asks the landlord to pay the poor rates at £80. The landlord acknowledges that he cannot find anyone else to take the farm: with the greatest reluctance he agrees.

After some more discussion (in which the tenant rubs in the fact that he knows that the landlord is desperately hard up and cutting his household expenditure), the landlord says

L: ... I consider that you agree to keep the farm another year on the terms proposed.

T: I did not quite say that: but, however to oblige you, I will keep it on one condition.

L: What is that?

T: Why Sir, I have many times obliged you with my vote when you requested it. Now, I think one good turn deserves another; so I hope that you will vote at the next election for Mr Coke and Mr — (Landlords starts but recovers himself) whom several of us have agreed to support. Mr — has been recommended to us by Sir Francis Burdett, who assures us that he is a staunch advocate for a thorough and effectual Reform. It was our intention at one time to set up two reformers as candidates; but some of us observed, that Mr Coke had always opposed those men who have brought the country its present state of distress and misery ... and that therefore he ought to be supported. Besides Mr Coke has been an excellent landlord and therefore though he may not be all we wish, we would not do anything to vex him, especially at a time such as this. But for this we should certainly have determined upon supporting two Reformers.

L: Indeed Mr S., I cannot conscientiously vote for Mr Coke and Mr —.

T: You did not, Sir, pay any regard to my conscience when you compelled me to vote for Mr Wodehouse. But however, just as you please Sir: only I cannot hold the farm unless you promise to vote for those two gentlemen; (going) and I know you cannot find another tenant.

The landlord caves in. But worse, the tenant invites the landlord to a dinner to celebrate the return to the radical Sir Francis Burdette for Westminster 'and the triumph of the people over the aristocracy'. The landlord is left to muse over the mess that Lord Liverpool and his government have made of things, and the ways in which it is impinging on the landlord himself.

Of course this is a fantasy – a day dream - and yet it does contain some truths: the conviction on the part of the landlord that the tenant's vote is his to be used as the landlord directs, the use of the termination of the tenant's tenancy as a threat, the way in which the landlord's preferences cuts across the political preference of the tenant for reform and, of course, the way in which landlord power over the tenants is diminished by agricultural depression.

We should not suppose that the direction of tenants by landlords stopped with the Reforms of 1832. Indeed, by widening the franchise to £50 tenants, by the so called Chandos clause, may have made it worse or so it was held by witnesses to a House of Commons enquiry into bribery in elections in November 1835.<sup>17</sup> (These were men in the paradoxical nineteenth-century situation of being both sizeable farmers but also without a secure interest in their farms, and so potentially more liable to landlord pressure than the

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<sup>17</sup> *Cheshire Examine*, 28 Nov. 1835.

lessee for 21 years or lives (the numbers of whom were diminishing). And, of course, if the logic is correct that depression forced landlords to allow tenants some leeway, rising conditions probably allowed them to establish a new grip over their tenants.

One of the witnesses who gave evidence was a solicitor from Sandbach in Cheshire. He thought that tenants who lacked leases and who were pro-Reform 'were completely under the direction of the landlord and must vote according to his direction'. Asked whether the 'landlords exercise a great influence in the county of Cheshire over their tenants' he replied 'yes, and bring them up to vote just like soldiers, well drilled, headed by one of their principal tenants and perhaps the agent with them'.

Do the tenants always vote with the landlords? - I scarcely know an instance where the tenants of a person favourable to one of the Tory candidates have voted against his landlord.

Do they keep an eye upon them as they go up to the poll? - They march them up and in some cases the landlord at the head of them.

The *Cheshire Examiner*, reporting these exchanges, held that 'the degrading effects of toryism have no where been seen more odiously than in Cheshire, where most of the tenants of tory lordlings, in all that relates to their privileges as Englishmen, have resembled serfs rather than free-born men'.

It was not only Tory landowners who behaved in this way as the press occasionally pointed out. The losing candidate in the North Wiltshire constituency in 1837, P. Methuen, had his steward write to one of his farming tenants, Mr John Little of Biddlestone, giving him notice to quit. Little was described in the press as a respectable farmer. Methuen's steward admitted that Methuen knew that Little had both canvassed for and voted for Methuen, but as Little's father and brothers had both been against him, Methuen thought that 'all connection between the families should cease as landlord and tenant'. This episode was widely reported in the press.<sup>18</sup> In fact one account suggested that there had been an understood rule that the farmer was allowed to cast his second vote as he wished, but that Methuen was trying to establish a rule that he controlled both votes.<sup>19</sup> The *Morning Post* noted somewhat sourly that nothing of this sort had been noted as being perpetrated by a Tory landlord.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *John Bull* 16 Oct. 1837; *The Age* 15 Oct. 1837 (which reports that a second tenant was also given notice to quit); *The Standard*, 14, 16 Oct 1837 (which prints the letters from the Devizes Chronicle and the Spectator), *Morning Post* 16 Oct 1837.

<sup>19</sup> *The Standard*, 16 Oct. 1837.

<sup>20</sup> *Morning Post* 18 Oct. 1837.

One suspects though that the overt management of farmers, and their dragooning in displays of political power at elections, became less acceptable with the passage of time. So too their eviction for voting the wrong way which drew hostile press comment, but one always suspects that more subtle forms of management came into play. Tenants who disagreed with their landlord's politics were treated less favourably than their quiescent fellows and perhaps encouraged to move on. Some landlords continued to offer direct instructions to their tenants as to how they should vote where others seem to have been more cautious in doing anything which might be taken to be coercion.<sup>21</sup> A few landlords made statements in which they eschewed any claim they might have to determine their tenants' votes. The Earl of Hamilton in West Lothian was reported in 1832 as saying that ‘

his name must on no account be use to influence the election: that he deemed all interference by the peerage in the election of members of the House of Commons as unconstitutional, and all solicitations by landlords as such, unless in the case of personal canvass, as a gross act of subversion of the spirit of the reform measure.

But Hamilton's opponents in the election were busy whipping their tenants into line.<sup>22</sup>

Similar statements were made by some of the Lincolnshire gentry.<sup>23</sup> But the determination of tenants' votes by landlords did not go away even if it was perhaps handled more discretely. In 1847, after the Earl of Stradbroke had advocated the granting of leases to incentivise tenants, *Punch* published a spoof letter under the signature of ‘A Landlord’.

It is mighty fine to talk of granting leases to tenants. Landlords, in doing so, no doubt would swim with the tide of public opinion, and like pigs, cut their own throats. Lord Stradbroke would ask us to have the kindness to commit suicide. He talks as if the use of landed property were merely to grown corn and that sort of thing; as if its value did not, in a great measure, depend on the weight which it gives the landlord in the representation of the country. Of that his lordship would rob us without scruple. Suppose we grant a tenant a lease, and he turns round and votes in opposition to our wishes – what are we to do? A tenant-at-will has, of course, a proper sense of what is due to his landlord. Arm him with a lease, he may poll most objectionably, and politically speaking, snap his fingers in our faces. Intimidation is tyrannical, but legitimate influence is our just privilege. If we are to preserve that, we can never grant leases. Let not Lord Stradbroke then seek to deprive us of the rope which, by prescriptive right, and for constitutional purposes, we hold round the neck of the farmer.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See the examples in Olney, *Lincolnshire politics*, ch. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in the *Leicester Chronicle*, 8 Sept. 1832 reprinting from *The Scotsman*

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<sup>24</sup> *Punch*, 25 Sept. 1847, p. 119.

Again, this is a fiction, but it also makes it clear how the radical press continued to believe that landlords exercised a power over their tenants, and how important in that power was their lack of leases. In this way the lease was a bulwark of the farmer's independence.

## II

Enough has been said to show in the 1820s, '30s and perhaps later, it was probably an incautious farmer who pursued political interests that were contrary to his landlord's.<sup>25</sup> There was then an envelope in which political activity was possible. We should not make the mistake of seeing intermittent parliamentary contests to be the sum of political activity. There were political issues with which farmers might want to be concerned: the provision of infrastructure, turnpikes and canals, enclosure, the maintenance of the price of corn of course, poor rates and the defence of property.<sup>26</sup> Farmers' meetings to prepare petitions in favour of protection and the continuance of the corn laws, for amendments to the malt tax and generally petitions to relieve agriculture from its depressed state were entirely acceptable to landlords because their purpose was to maintain the prosperity of farming (or revive farming), and that implied the maintenance of rent levels, an object with which all landlords could agree.

Agricultural historians have barely begin to consider the dialogues that farmers tried to establish between themselves, government and parliament through petitions, addresses although there is much material on early nineteenth-century county meetings in the recent volumes of the *History of Parliament, 1820-32* which shows, for instance, a steady flow of petitions from Norfolk in the decade of distress.<sup>27</sup> There are more to be found in the county and market town newspapers now coming on line. Of course, the question to be posed is how far were these fronts for gentry and how far were they genuinely farmers' gatherings.

Within the village we think of the farmer as king, the dominant force on the vestry and the controlling influence over the poor law, the administration of which doubtless

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<sup>25</sup> In what follows, I have relied on D. Eastwood, 'Contesting the politics of deference: the rural electorate, 1820-60', in J. Lawrence and M. Taylor (eds), *People, state and society. Electoral behaviour in England since 1820* (Aldershot, 1997), pp. 27-49, J. R. Fisher, 'Agrarian Politics', in Collins (ed.), *Agrarian History VII* (i), pp. 321-57 and Edwin Jaggard, 'Farmers and English county politics, 1832-80', *Rural Hist.* 16 (2005), pp. 191-207.

<sup>26</sup> On the latter, see the proliferation of farmers' prosecution societies in the late eighteenth century:

<sup>27</sup> See the Norfolk constituency history in *The History of Parliament 1820-32* (which is also available online at [www.historyofparliamentonline.org](http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org)).

brought them into contact with JPs. After 1834 there was also a new political arena in the in the Poor Law Boards, elected on a property franchise, which farmers could often control with the aim of keeping paupers in the workhouse and the poor rate down. Here Hurren's studies of the politics of the New Poor Law in Northamptonshire are revelatory and offer a model which should be followed elsewhere. But again this is a form of political activity acceptable to landlords because its normal objective was to reduce the poor rates which were competitors with landlords for the farmers' profit.<sup>28</sup>

### III

Two periods seem to have been important in the development of farmers' political activities. The first was the period of low prices after the Napoleonic wars, in which the protection of agriculture by the poor laws was a matter of active debate, and the other the depressed years after the downturn of the 1870s when the consequences of open markets became all too obvious and farm income fell sharply. Both may be read as farmers engaging in politics to try and protect their capital and standard of living after years in which both had advanced. Such periods of rural depression in the nineteenth century seem to have been met with a political activism not found in the eighteenth century. We might also suppose that larger and better capitalised farmers, increasingly running their farms at arm's length through bailiffs, had not only more to protect but also greater leisure time to devote to politics. In this respect, political activity is an aspect of the larger social change represented by the farmer's (or the farmer's wife's) piano.

Institutionally the pivotal event is normally accepted to have been the cattle plague of the mid-1860s: farmer disappointment at the unwillingness of the existing agricultural societies to lobby government led directly to the establishment of the Chambers of Agriculture which both landowners and farmers were expected to join: they were seen as strengthening the alliance of the two rather than acting as a farmer's mouthpiece. That said, landowners could disavow the spokesmen of the Chambers as being unrepresentative of the views of the whole farming community when those spokesmen cut across the landlord's interests.<sup>29</sup> The identity of interest that the Chambers

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<sup>28</sup> E. Hurren, *Protesting about pauperism. Poverty, politics and poor relief in late Victorian England, 1870-1900* (London, 2007), part two.

<sup>29</sup> See here the comments of Mr Wilbraham Egerton, Mr Bromley-Davenport, Lord Elcho and the aside of Sir William Harcourt, all made in second reading debate on the Agricultural Holdings (England) Bill, 19 July 1875, *Parliamentary Debates (Commons)*, Third ser., 225, cols. 1668-1724.

claimed to represent fractured though as farmers came to perceive their interest as being different to that of their landlords.<sup>30</sup>

As we shall see, the ‘elephant in the room’ of late nineteenth-century rural politics was Ireland although domestic developments also conspired to revive aspirations for a statutory tenant right. The parliamentary campaign for compensation for improvements made by the tenant (what the English called tenant right, far short of what the Irish understood by the term) had fizzled out in the late 1840s when a select committee declined to recommend legislation.<sup>31</sup> The conferment of a statutory basis to Ulster tenant right and the conferment of a faux tenant right throughout Ireland caught the attention of English farmers, but what could just about be swallowed to bring peace to Ireland was definitely not for consumption in England.<sup>32</sup> Following independent moves to introduce a landlord-tenant bill, the Conservatives introduced a rather lukewarm bill in 1875 which, although it passed into law in the teeth of landlord opposition, was widely condemned for its inadequacy, indeed, its unintended effects. At the end of the 1870s the more radical English elements formed the Farmer’s Alliance to press for the implementation of something like the Three ‘F’s familiar from Irish history. In the 1880 election the Liberals offered legislation on both the game laws and tenants’ improvements and brought forwards legislation in 1880 and 1883 respectively. They also brought forwards new legislation for Ireland. For a time it looked as though the Liberals were making a successful play for the farming vote, but they would not be drawn to legislation on Irish tenant right lines and the possibility of any alliance between Liberals and farmers dissolved in the mid-1880s over the former’s campaign for ‘Three acres and a cow’ for farm labourers. An attempt to reconstruct the landlord’s and farmer’s alliance by the Earl of Winchelsea in 1892-3 was met with indifference by tenant farmers who, by that time, no longer wished to sign up to an organisation led by the landowners.<sup>33</sup> By the end of the

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<sup>30</sup> For the following, see Ewen Green, ‘No longer the Farmer’s Friend? The Conservative Party and Agricultural Protection, 1880-1914’, in Wordie (ed.), *Agriculture and politics*, pp. 150-56.

<sup>31</sup> Mingay, ‘The farmer’, pp. 796-7.

<sup>32</sup> On this point, see the evidence of Thomas Purves, a tenant farmer from Caithness, to the Select Committee on the Game Laws (BPP, 1873, 000), QQ. 3443, 3458, creatively misquoted by Lord Elcho (one of Purvis’s interlocutors in 1873) in the House of Commons debate on the Agricultural Holdings (England) Bill, *Parliamentary Debates (Commons)*, Third ser., 225, cos. 1696-7 and in Lancashire, J. Vincent (ed.), *A selection from the diaries of Edward Henry Stanley, 15th Earl of Derby (1826-93) between September 1869 and March 1878* (Camden fifth ser., 4, 1994), p. 118 amplified by the report of his speech in the *Preston Chronicle*, 12 Oct. 1872.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Readman, ‘Conservatives and the Politics of Land: Lord Winchilsea’s National Agricultural Union, 1893-1901’, *English Historical Rev.*, 121 (2006), pp. 25-69.

century deference was not what it had been, but neither had it wholly disappeared and it perhaps even appeared in more cloying forms, including the illuminated address.

It seems fairly clear that nineteenth-century landlords were hostile to the emergence of a farmer's public sphere. Early nineteenth-century farmer's societies were expected to be non-political and to deal with questions of technical improvement and innovation. And whilst the early societies also included a great deal of wining and dining, they were also heavily infiltrated by landlords who perhaps dominated proceedings, certainly the more formal occasions. Likewise the journals of the regional agricultural societies and later the Royal Agricultural Society were not campaigning publications but sought to disseminate good agricultural practice.<sup>34</sup> They allowed a minority of farmers an outlet for writings about the practical business of farming and gave them a stage on which to advertise their inventions.<sup>35</sup> How often farmers met and discussed politics, whether the politics of the poor law or the politics of protection, is far from certain. The rules of association of the local agricultural clubs often forbade party political discussions, but discussion of the business of farming inevitably took on a political hue when the context in which farming operated was mentioned.<sup>36</sup> This must also be seen in the context of discussions of agricultural politics and the contribution of letters by farmers, often writing under pseudonyms, to local newspapers, and the emergence of a specialist farming press. That there was an appetite for political debate is illustrated by the crowds of farmers' that Cobbett could attract on his speaking tours of 1830 described in his *Rural Rides*. Another forum which farmers increasingly penetrated was the government commission of enquiry: the question of who was invited to give evidence and how they were selected remains to be studied. With its printed evidence, the commission was a means by which heterodox views could be circulated, even if the commission itself rejected them. Unquestionably then, landlords had to accept some discussion of politics. What might not be tolerated was the discussion of the internal affairs of the estate in public: landowners expected that rent rebates and the like would remain a matter of confidence between the landlord and the tenant and would not appear in the local press.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> See N. Goddard, 'Agricultural institutions: societies, associations and the press', *Agrarian History* VII (i) p. 660 for a discussion of the editorial policy of the *JRASE*.

<sup>35</sup> For an early example of a farmer who wrote for the Bath and West, Jo Bettey, 'George Boswell of Puddletown (1735-1815): progressive farmer and author', *AgHR* 57 (2009), 58-69.

<sup>36</sup> Jaggard, 'Farmers and English country politics', p. 198.

<sup>37</sup> For an example of landlord complaining that his dealings with individual tenants had got into the press, J. S. Matthews, 'Underwriting disaster: risk and the management of agricultural crisis in mid-nineteenth century Cheshire', *AgHR* 58 (2010), pp. 224-5.

In some counties landowners were adept at managing the farmer's interest by making it their own. In others landowners had to accept the emergence of spokesmen for the farming interest who were willing to offer opinions which cut across those of the landowners themselves, the emergence of farmer's candidates in parliamentary elections and even the occasional defeat of landowner's candidates when they refused to bow to the will of the farming community. In some cases candidates were dropped and others substituted when it seemed likely that they could not command the farmer's vote. Here the informal pre-election canvass remained important in ascertaining whether a candidate had a prospect of winning. Even Philip Pusey, MP for Berkshire and a better friend to the farming interest than most, withdrew from the county contest in 1852 after he refused to declare for protection and found that local opinion turned against him.<sup>38</sup> In a sense the landowners brought these circumstances upon themselves. Farmers' candidates emerged where the traditional leaders of rural society were thought to be inattentive to the farmers' interest. In 1850 some 1200 farmers from the Newark area of Nottinghamshire put their names to 'An address to the clergy, gentry and nobility of the south division of Nottinghamshire' which expressed resentment at free trade, but also the lack of support being given to the agricultural interest. The following year Lord Newark was narrowly defeated in a by-election by a retired solicitor who represented the farming interest, albeit after the majority of tenant farmers had bent in the face of landlord pressure and voted for Newark, even those who had signed the address of the previous year.<sup>39</sup>

Exactly who were the first generation of farmers' leaders remains to be established. Jaggard has written about a Cornish farmer, William Snell, who emerged in the 1850s as a spokesman for the farmers, arguing that they were entitled to their own representatives rather than being represented by the country gentry, and arguing for their interests on questions such as the reform of the Game Laws. A similar figure in Lincolnshire was William Loft (c.1798-1854) who farmed 500 ac. of tenanted land, 500 acres of freehold, was a founder of the Alford Agricultural Society, a Conservative, protectionist and published author of a paper on varieties of wheat.<sup>40</sup>

The parallel question which also needs exploring is the attitude of landlords to their tenants who involved themselves in parliamentary politics. It needs to be remembered that parliamentary polls were not secret until the Ballot Act of 1872. Even

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<sup>38</sup> Jaggard, 'Farmers and English county politics', p. 200.

<sup>39</sup> J. R. Fisher, 'The limits of deference; agricultural communities in a mid-nineteenth century election campaign', *J. British Studies* 21 (1981), pp. 90-105, the address discussed at p. 102.

<sup>40</sup> Olney, *Lincolnshire politics*, p. 27, n and *passim*.

after this date tenants in the hinterland of Liverpool came under pressure to vote their landlord's line, and in 1880 the Conservatives took out advertisements in the *Ormskirk Advertiser* reminding tenants that 'no one can find out how you voted'.<sup>41</sup> It was held in radical circles that tenants who disobeyed their landlords were liable to be evicted: potentially this was so. By this time eviction for a display of political independence was not common in England. Cragoe has pointed to some examples following the 1868 election in Wales, but the offence of these tenants seems to have been not so much voting Liberal as their political activism and canvassing on behalf of the Liberals.<sup>42</sup> In Scotland there are a handful of instances of politically-inspired eviction, the most notorious of which was that of George Hope of Fenton Barns in East Lothian.<sup>43</sup> The third generation of his family to farm at Fenton Barns, Hope was well known as both an improving farmer and a commentator on farming. He won an essay competition sponsored by the Anti-Corn Law League in 1842 and whilst he favoured free trade, he also advocated a range of other legislative improvements, including security of tenure, the abolition of the game laws and the reduction of the landlords' rights over the tenant. He also travelled widely throughout England and his farm came to be of sufficient standing for him to take a succession of farm pupils. A contributor to the newspapers on farming matters, he sat as one of the commissioners appointed by the government to enquire into the law of Hypothec in 1864.<sup>44</sup> In 1865 he was persuaded to offer himself as a late parliamentary candidate for East Lothian against Lord Elcho, the heir of the Earl of Wemyss. But in 1872 he was also informed that his lease of Fenton Barns would not be renewed, and despite an agitation on his behalf, he retired in 1873 to a freehold farm he had bought in Peebleshire. In 1875, the year before his death, he stood as candidate for East Aberdeenshire where again he failed to secure the seat.

The reason for his removal from his tenancy was conversations he had with the Secretary of the Royal Agricultural Society who was gathering material for a report on the state of agriculture in East Lothian. Jenkins' account was highly critical of the landlords in the country and was criticised by Hope's landlord, Mr Nisbet Hamilton, at an

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<sup>41</sup> Alistair Mutch, *Rural life in south-west Lancashire, 1840-1914* (Lancaster, 1988), p. 28.

<sup>42</sup> M. Cragoe, 'The anatomy of an eviction campaign: the General Election of 1868 in Wales and its aftermath', *Rural Hist.* 9 (1998), p. 180. This article muddles eviction for arrears with political eviction. Cragoe was also unaware of the cases discussed here.

<sup>43</sup> For Hope see Hope, *George Hope of Fenton Barns*, and the obituary in *The Times* (reproduced from the *Scotsman*), 5 Dec. 1876.

<sup>44</sup> BPP 1865, Report of Her Majesty's commissioners appointed to consider the law relating to the landlord's right of Hypothec in Scotland. Hypothec was the right of the landowner to take priority as creditor to one of his tenants.

agricultural society dinner in March 1872. Hope admitted at the dinner that he had supplied Jenkins with information but regretted the way in which it had been presented by him. On the following Monday he received notice that his lease would not be renewed.<sup>45</sup>

It was generally believed that this was done in order to impress on the tenantry the determination of the landlords to take extreme proceedings against any tenant who would presume to let the truth be known by writing to newspapers or giving information which might be published.<sup>46</sup>

The writer, James M. Russell, alleged that other farmers who supported Hope had themselves been evicted. Russell was himself the subject of a writing campaign on his behalf, having been first evicted and then bankrupted by his landlord although it was claimed that he was well capitalised and able to pay his creditors.<sup>47</sup>

In fact Hope's 'eviction' had larger consequences. Following the parliamentary debates over the Irish Land Question and the first Irish Land Act of 1870, there was a renewed interest amongst English and Scottish farmers in tenant right. The eviction of Hope and another farmer, Mr Saddler of Ferrygate, caught the attention of the MP for Bedford, James Howard who, with the Norfolk farming MP, C. S. Read, introduced a landlord and tenant bill into parliament. This failed to progress, but after Read was given a junior ministerial post in the incoming Conservative government in 1874, Disraeli took up and secured the passage of an English Agricultural Holdings Bill in 1875 although, as we noted earlier, the act was widely regarded as insufficient and ineffectual.<sup>48</sup>

Relations between landlords and tenants seem to have been especially poisonous in East Lothian, where the landlords appear to have been determined to suppress tenant independence. The nearest we find to this sort of behaviour in England comes from Lancashire. In the 1868 election, the Catholic *châtelaine* of the Scarisbrick estate tried to swing her tenants round to the Liberals after they promised to disestablish the Church of Ireland. This was openly condemned; her tenantry were closely supervised in the way they voted, and promises were made that any tenants who were evicted for not voting the estate line would be found farms by the neighbouring estates. The early 1870s saw the establishment of two farmers' societies in south Lancashire, the more important of which

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<sup>45</sup> Here I follow the account found in Hope's memorial volume, ch. 17 and a letter by James Caird published in *The Times* on 1 Apr. 1872: *ODNB* is misleading on the chronology of events making it sound as though the termination of his tenancy came later.

<sup>46</sup> James M. Russell, 'Lord Wemyss on agrarian agitation', letter published in *The Times*, 3 Feb. 1886.

<sup>47</sup> George Brooks, 'A picture of agrarian agitation', letter to *The Times*, 25 Jan. 1886; id., *The destruction of Scottish agriculture* (1895).

<sup>48</sup> W. E. Bear, *The relations of landlord and tenant in England and Scotland* (1875), pp. 42-5; Fisher, 'Agrarian politics', pp. 337.

approached the Earl of Derby (as one of the major local landowners) to be its President. Derby accepted and spoke at its inaugural meeting: he recorded that it had been joined by ‘the leading landowners to keep it out of bad hands’. His steward tried to steer its discussions away from politics and questions of the relationship of landlords and tenants to the technical discussions of practice. Ten years later Derby was told that the farmers were moving towards making ‘the same demands as had been made in Ireland’ and that the agitators were active amongst them: ‘they had their way at farmers’ meetings, where the gentry did not commonly attend’.<sup>49</sup> The other society established at this time, which evolved into the Liverpool and District farmers’ club, was established by the agent on the Earl of Sefton’s estate. By 1890 the agent was refusing to meet a delegation from the society which wished to discuss rent reductions and was denouncing agricultural clubs in general as talking shops in which agitators set about turning tenants against landlords, and labourers against both. He advocated government action to suppress ‘agitators, clubs and talking assemblies’.<sup>50</sup>

This then was an environment in which relations between landlords and tenants were deteriorating as the agricultural depression became established. It forms the background to the discharge of Frank Middlehurst from his farm on the Scarisbrick estate. Middlehurst took the tenancy of his farm in 1883: he seems to have been a determined and successful improving tenant, but also an inveterate letter writer to the papers and an advocate of direct farmer representation in parliament. In the 1892 election he stood against the sitting Conservative member as a Liberal (but really representing the Farmers) who was held to be too distant from the farmers he represented. Whilst Middlehurst polled respectably, he came no where near unseating the incumbent. Later in the year he attended a meeting of the Central Chamber of Agriculture which he denounced ‘as a ridiculous demonstration in favour of Protection’. Later he went to the inaugural conference of the National Federation of Farming Clubs where he spoke, locating himself as a moderate interested in mild reform and unwilling to be associated with either wing of the tenant farmer movement. Nonetheless, the Scarisbrick estate gave him notice to quit in 1893, seeing him as an agitator and troublemaker, whose views were likely to infect other farmers on their and other estates. In fact Middlehurst found little support amongst his fellow tenants. He was expelled from the Liverpool club, denounced in a petition got

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<sup>49</sup> Mutch, *Rural Life*, p. 52.

<sup>50</sup> For the following see Mutch, *Rural life*, pp. 29-30, 51-6. For Derby’s role, see in addition to Mutch, Vincent (ed.), *Selection*, pp. 105, 118.

up by the estate and in letters to the press. Middlehurst moved to Essex where he took a farm and continued his activism from there. The aim of cowing the tenants as a whole and maintaining tenant discipline appears to have worked: a few years later it was said that farmers 'could not be persuaded to say in public what they said at their own fireside' and more radical developments had been headed off. The estate's tolerance of politically-active and vocal tenants was shown to be limited even if, in other respects, Middlehurst seems to have been a good tenant.

#### IV

Lancashire cannot be equated with England and Middlehurst's experience only reflects the conflicts which occur when a vocal and politically-engaged farmer became the tenant of a conservative estate. But the story we have begun to outline here makes it clear how impossible it was for a farmers' party to have emerged in England in the nineteenth century. Where European agrarian parties were based on large numbers of freeholding peasants, the much smaller number of English and Scottish farmers were in thrall to their landlords. one can go further and say that it is impossible to see the English farming community as fully franchised in the nineteenth century, True, farmers had the vote and could use it to elect their own candidates when relations with landowners broke down. In this respect, they had force of numbers in some at least of the county constituencies. But it is also only too evident that they were subject to management. Institutionally they could belong to farming societies and clubs which were formally (if not always practically) dominated by landowners. They well have offered opportunities for interchange between farmers and between farmers and landlords, but they also gave landlords an audience to whom they could expound the landlord's view of the world. The Chambers of Commerce may have been established with a more campaigning approach in mind, but they were still predicated on a congruence of interest between the landlords and tenants and the assumption that what was good for one was good for another. The Lancashire landlords looked warily on the new agricultural societies of the 1860s and tried to dominate them. Even quite late in the nineteenth-century there were still landlord expectations about how tenants should conduct the themselves in politics. It was only in the twentieth century that farming really came of age with the establishment of a broadly-based society for farmers which, whilst political, was not radical. It deliberately excluded from its membership both landowners and labourers. It took less interest in the tenurial relationship between landlords and tenants and more in the production and sale of the farmers' produce. It may

not be coincidental that the antecedent societies of the NFU were founded at a time when the dissolution of the landed order was proceeding a-pace.

Many landowners felt that the relations between landlord and tenant were infected by a new commercialism in the later nineteenth century. Olney has suggested that the lineages who built their capital up in the years of the Napoleonic wars and then in the period of high farming tended to disappear in the last years of the century (a suggestion which others might try and verify) to be replaced by men interested in the land rather than the paternalism of land: as a Lincolnshire landowner wrote in 1883, 'I fear gratitude no longer enters into the relations between landlord and tenant, which are now resolved into mere matters of bargain'.<sup>51</sup> The gentry's pleasure of the command of men, and the privilege of rural deference was increasingly disappearing before the First World War.<sup>52</sup> The last bargain the landlord and his tenant made was often the tenant's agreement to buy his land. The farmer was then confronted by forces from which he had been protected, notably the mortgage: but the freeholding farmer was now removed from old debates about compensation for improvements and the landlord's right to game.

In a real sense though, the farmer did not come of age until the First World War. The war brought something of a turn around in farming fortunes, but it also brought a different, and perhaps closer control than anything that even Holkham tenants had experienced. In the strained circumstances of 1917 and 1918, farmers had their first taste of state control. Farming may be said to have entered the modern world in these years, when farmers became beholden to government rather than their landlords.

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<sup>51</sup>Olney, *Rural Society*, p. 60.

<sup>52</sup>Cannadine