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Author(s): Jane Humphries

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Enclosures, Common Rights, and Women: The Proletarianization of Families in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries

JANE HUMPHRIES

This article argues against the mainstream view that eighteenth-century common rights were of little significance to working people. Markets in common rights and in their products provide an index of value, and when neither common rights nor derived products were bought and sold, values are imputed from the market prices of similar goods. Since women and children were the primary exploiters of common rights, their loss led to changes in women's economic position within the family and more generally to increased dependence of whole families on wages and wage earners.

In his classic "Enclosure and the Labour Supply in the Industrial Revolution," J. D. Chambers disputed Marx's claim that parliamentary enclosure was instrumental in the creation of an English proletariat.¹ A critical element in Chambers's argument was his belittlement of cottagers' and squatters' common rights and therefore their ability to mitigate wage dependence. Common rights were but "a thin and squalid curtain" between the "growing army of labourers" and "utter proletarianization."² Although other aspects of Chambers's influential anti-Marxist tract have undergone substantive revision, his verdict on the significance of common rights has remained largely unchallenged.³

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The author is a member of the Faculty of Economics and Politics, Cambridge University, Sidgwick Avenue, Cambridge CB3 9DD, United Kingdom.

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¹ J. D. Chambers, "Enclosure and the Labour Supply in the Industrial Revolution," *Economic History Review*, 5 (No. 3, 1953), pp. 319–43.

² *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³ N. F. R. Crafts, "Enclosure and the Labour Supply Revisited," *Explorations in Economic History*, 15 (Apr. 1978), pp. 172–83; W. Lazonick, "Karl Marx and Enclosures in England," *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 6, pt. 2 (Summer 1974), pp. 1–59; M. E. Turner, "Parliamentary Enclosure and Landownership Change in Buckinghamshire," *Economic History Review*, 28 (Nov. 1975), pp. 563–79; J. A. Yelling, *Common Field and Enclosure in England, 1450–1850* (London, 1977); K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660–1900* (Cambridge, 1985); Robert C. Allen, "The Growth of Labor Productivity in Early Modern English Agriculture," *Explorations in Economic History*, 25 (June 1988), pp. 117–46; Robert C. Allen, "Agrarian Fundamentalism and English Agricultural Development," paper presented at the Harvard Economic Workshop, October 6, 1989.

Scholarly neglect of common rights derives from two sources. First, both Chambers and J. H. Clapham, another distinguished critic of Marx, argued that as wage labor predated and was not significantly enlarged by enclosure, the two could not be causally related: enclosure was irrelevant to proletarianization. Second, where commons and wastes were exploited on sufferance, that is, where consent had been implied by lack of interference, and not as a legal right, their alienation left no legal trace, making it impossible, according to Chambers and Clapham, to gauge the proportion of the rural population affected.⁴ Researchers turned with relief to more amenable aspects of the debate.

Undoubtedly wage labor was of relatively long standing in the English context. Prior to parliamentary enclosure families in receipt of wages comprised a significant proportion of the rural population.⁵ What these figures do not capture is the extent to which families were *dependent* on wages, for, as Charles Tilly suggests, "it is possible to be a little bit proletarian." Rather than pushing families out of one category (propertied/peasant) into another (proletarian), parliamentary enclosure eroded nonwage sources of subsistence available to semi-proletarian families and left them increasingly dependent on wages. In this sense it affected some of the 60 percent of families already in receipt of wages by the end of the seventeenth century, as well as the additional 15 percent earning wages by 1830.⁶

As in many parts of the Third World today, semi-proletarianization took the form of the husband/father working for wages while the wife/mother and the children added to family subsistence by exploiting traditional rights to rural resources.⁷ Misled by ahistoric stereotypes of male breadwinners and appurtenant wives and children, economic historians have overlooked the commons' value in facilitating contributions to family subsistence from wives and children, contributions which were not insubstantial compared with the male wage or with what

⁴ "Since they [cottage labourers with customary useage of the commons] had no proprietary rights they do not appear in the enclosure award or land tax returns . . ." (Chambers, "Enclosure," p. 104); see also J. H. Clapham, *An Economic History of Modern Britain*, vol. 1: *The Early Railway Age* (Cambridge, 1967).

⁵ Clapham, *Economic History*, p. 113; C. Tilly, "Demographic Origins of the European Proletariat," in David Levine, ed., *Proletarianization and Family History* (London, 1984), pp. 1–85; D. Levine, "Production, Reproduction and the Proletarian Family in England, 1500–1851," in Levine, ed., *Proletarianization*, pp. 87–128.

⁶ These estimates and the quotation are from Tilly, "Demographic Origins," p. 8; see also Snell, *Annals*, p. 168; Lazonick, "Karl Marx," p. 87.

⁷ Sometimes even sympathetic authorities choose to emphasize the ideological or sociological implications of the loss of the commons. The Orwins' emphasis on the erosion of collective responsibility, Thirsk's on the boost given to individualism, and Mill's on the reduced sense of independence, although raising important points, obscure evidence that working people suffered specific economic injuries. See C. S. and C. S. Orwin, *The Open Fields* (Oxford, 1967); Joan Thirsk, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales* (Cambridge, 1967); Dennis R. Mills, "The Nineteenth Century Peasant at Melbourn, Cambridgeshire," in Richard M. Smith, ed., *Land, Kinship and Life Cycle* (Cambridge, 1984).

women and children themselves could earn in wages. By eliminating the basis of such contributions in common rights, enclosure increased families' dependence on wages and wage earners, pressures which can be understood only in the context of the importance of family participation in securing an eighteenth-century livelihood. If proletarianization is seen as a process of gradual elimination of sources of family subsistence other than wages, a causal link between the loss of common rights and wage dependence is reestablished. Its analysis must involve the valuation of common rights and the effects of their alienation.

Nor is the failure of enclosure awards to record the expurgation of customarily enjoyed but nonlegal rights an insuperable obstacle to rigorous analysis of cottagers' and squatters' losses. On the basis of contemporary testimony, culled from government reports, agricultural surveys, and village autobiographies, as well as evidence from manorial court rolls and probate records, modern scholars have constructed a picture of widespread access to agricultural resources by way of customary and common rights, surviving well into the eighteenth century. Thus R. W. Malcolmson writes: "In areas of wide expanse—the fens of East Anglia, Dartmoor and other Moorland districts, the open field countryside of central England, forests throughout the country—cottagers and smallholders sustained a viable, if often tenuous, economy because of their ability to keep stock; and in many individual parishes in regions of intensive arable husbandry villagers enjoyed similar advantages from a local marsh, waste or other uncultivated piece of land, or from rights of access to unenclosed fields at times when no crops were growing."⁸

Although legally demonstrable entitlements were compensated, enclosure awards probably did not benefit the smallholders to the same extent as had traditional landholding arrangements. The considerable expenses of enclosure, their disproportionate allocation, and the inability of smallholders to mobilize their land award in the same way that common rights had been utilized, often made smallholders' posi-

⁸ R. W. Malcolmson, "Ways of Getting a Living in Eighteenth Century England," in R. E. Pahl, ed., *On Work* (Oxford, 1988), p. 51. Similarly, J. M. Martin emphasizes the prevalence of common rights among cottagers and small-scale landowners in the Feldon of Warwickshire, and June Sheppard stresses the universality of access to the wastes for all established households in the Yorkshire townships which she surveyed. See J. M. Martin, "Village Traders and the Emergence of a Proletariat in South Warwickshire," *Agricultural History Review*, 32, pt. 2 (1984), pp. 179–88; and June A. Sheppard, "Field Systems of Yorkshire," in A. R. H. Baker and R. A. Butlin, eds., *Studies of Field Systems in the British Isles* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 145–87. For the classic view of a pre-enclosure democratic pattern of ownership, see G. E. Slater, *The English Peasantry and the Enclosure of Common Fields* (New York, 1968). And for a qualified view, which still includes beneficiaries whose common rights were legally insecure, "the cottager with little or no land who none the less kept a cow remained as an important figure in the late eighteenth century common field community," see Yelling, *Common Field*, p. 229.

tions untenable. The reaction was, all too often, a hasty sale to cover costs.⁹

On the fate of the second category of commoner, those without legal rights, there is even more general agreement: rights of custom were simply disregarded by the vast majority of enclosure commissions.¹⁰ In the rare cases where such rights were acknowledged, the beneficiaries were subject to the same kinds of pressures as were smallholders with legal claims. Thus at St. Neots, where a very small plot of land was given in lieu of a cowkeep, results were tragic: “. . . the enclosure of which land costing more than they could afford, they sold the lots at £5. The money was drank at the ale house, and the men spoiled by the habit came with their families to the parish.”¹¹ More usual forms of compensation were the creation of small commons for use by the poor, or the sale of land to establish funds which the guardians could distribute at their discretion to those considered deserving.¹²

So although strict quantification of the extent to which common rights and privileges were exploited is impossible, the issue seems uncontroversial: if beneficiaries from custom are included alongside those with legal entitlement, the commons appear to have been employed by a significant portion of the rural population, and in the unenclosed villages of the midland counties, perhaps the majority, until the era of parliamentary enclosure.

Although heaths and commons did not entirely disappear with enclosure, their size was drastically curtailed. Those who had hitherto exploited these resources, although initially differentiated according to

⁹ Confutation of this view has been based on the stability of size distributions of farms before and after enclosure; see J. D. Chambers, “Enclosures and the Small Landowner,” *Economic History Review*, 10 (Nov. 1940), pp. 118–27; G. E. Mingay, *Enclosure and the Small Farmer in the Age of the Industrial Revolution: Studies in Economic History* (London, 1968); K. Collins, “Marx on the English Agricultural Revolution: Theory and Evidence,” *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History*, 6 (No. 3, 1967), pp. 351–81. But Michael Turner’s investigation of several Buckinghamshire villages suggests that after enclosure many independent smallholders were replaced by tradespeople, professionals, and petty rentiers from the towns. Their influx left the distribution of holdings unchanged, but “on the other hand the personal constitution of landownership was sometimes restructured completely”; see Turner, “Parliamentary Enclosure,” p. 569. J. M. Martin’s documentation of extensive traffic in common rights before enclosure and in allotments after enclosure provides supporting evidence from Warwickshire; see Martin, “The Small Landowner and Parliamentary Enclosure in Warwickshire,” *Economic History Review*, 32 (Aug. 1979), pp. 328–43.

¹⁰ E. C. K. Gonner, *Common Land and Enclosures* (London, 1912), p. 365; Yelling, *Common Field*, p. 230.

¹¹ *Annals of Agriculture*, 16 (1791), p. 483; for other examples see Snell, *Annals*, pp. 190–91; Martin detects “a distinct decline in generosity over time” in the compensation meted out to the village poor by enclosure commissioners, see “Village Traders,” p. 185.

¹² Gonner, *Common Land*, p. 367; P. M. Giles, “The Enclosure of Common Lands in Stockport,” *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, 62 (1950–1), pp. 73–110, details how apparently unusually disinterested burghers enclosed and sold local commons allegedly to finance the construction of a prison and workhouse, but then belies this picture of public-spirited generosity with evidence of subsequent misappropriation of the proceeds.

their legal status, often came ultimately to the same dependence on wages. The question then becomes: what kind of a barrier against total wage dependence did the commons and wastes afford? Were the products of the commons, as the proponents of enclosure allege, “the trifling fruits of overstocked and ill-kempt lands?”¹³ This article argues they were more, concentrating on the specific advantages that poor people derived from rural resources. Markets in common rights and in their products provide an index of value, and when neither common rights nor their fruits were bought and sold, values are imputed from the market prices of similar goods. Since women and children were the primary exploiters of common rights, their loss led to changes in women’s economic position within the family and more generally to increased dependence of whole families on wages and wage earners.

THE VALUE OF COMMON RIGHTS: “THE TRIFLING FRUITS OF OVERSTOCKED AND ILL-KEMPT LANDS”

Widespread opposition to enclosure, even in the face of severe legal, economic, and social sanctions, suggests that cottagers and squatters felt aggrieved by the associated changes in agrarian organization.¹⁴ Migrants’ attraction to areas of extensive commons is further testimony to their worth.¹⁵ Moreover, it is hard to reconcile the disparagement of the commons with the assiduity with which laborers sought to exploit them. As Arthur Young observed, claims that enclosure benefited the poor were “directly in the teeth of their own feelings and positive assertions, as well as those of many other respectable eye witnesses.”¹⁶

Unlike orthodox economists, who ascribe a low probability to false consciousness and irrational expectations, contemporary proponents of enclosure (and ironically their modern counterparts) dismissed opposition as wrongheaded even when sympathetic to the motives of opponents. Thus the “anxiety in the customary tenants to have their little patrimony descend to their children,” although thought “laudable,” did nothing to check J. Bailey and G. Culley’s enthusiasm for enclosure in Northumberland.¹⁷ In a less compassionate mood, Arthur Young wrote

¹³ R. Parkinson, *A General View of the Agriculture of the County of Huntingdon* (London, 1813), p. 256; J. Bailey and G. Culley, *A General View of the Agriculture of the County of Northumberland* (London, 1813), p. 36.

¹⁴ J. L. and B. Hammond, *The Village Labourer, 1760–1832* (London, 1919); E. J. Hobsbawm and G. Rude, *Captain Swing* (London, 1969); E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1963); Snell, *Annals*; J. M. Neeson, “The Opponents of Enclosure in Eighteenth Century Northamptonshire,” *Past and Present*, 105 (Nov. 1984), pp. 114–39.

¹⁵ Thirsk, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, pp. 10–13, 204, 403; K. Wrightson, *English Society, 1580–1680* (London, 1982), pp. 126–27.

¹⁶ A. Young, *General Report on Enclosures* (London, 1808), p. 12.

¹⁷ Bailey and Culley, *Northumberland*, p. 263.

of enclosure in Northamptonshire: “The advantages of inclosing to every class of the people are now so well understood and combated at present but by a few old women who dislike it for no other reason but a love of singularity and a hatred of novelty.”¹⁸ He was, of course, subsequently to admit the harmful effects of enclosure on the poor although always maintaining that they could have been obviated by the wise use of waste land, on which cottages could have been built, the poor then moving bodily from commons to wastes.¹⁹

Debate on the merits of enclosure anticipated philosophical issues covered in modern welfare economics. Joseph Plymley struck a modern note in arguing that a net gain, and therefore the possibility of compensation, even if it was never actually paid, justified economic change: “Without looking minutely where the principal benefit of enclosure rests there is certainly a sufficient balance of advantage upon the whole to warrant the strenuous endeavours of every friend to mankind in forwarding them.”²⁰ He noted the external ecological cost of enclosing a beautiful area like Clun Forest, but was unmoved: “. . . when it is considered how little profit is produced to those who have a legal right in these wastes or to the public at large; what a scope is given to industry by their enclosure; and that the population of this country seems to require an extended cultivation, the latter motives must predominate.”²¹ Similarly, A. Pringle argued that “the interests of a few individuals ought to give way to those of the community,” and Arthur Young that possibly adverse effects on the poor could “never prove a reason against inclosing . . . [as] . . . the national benefits are much too great . . . but at most, call merely for a more tender attention to their interests.”²²

Contributors to the Board of Agriculture’s county surveys acknowledged the skewed distribution of the benefits from enclosure. Thomas Davis, for example, reported from Wiltshire, that “the advantages to be derived from a removal of these impediments to good husbandry, need not be enumerated . . . but it must be remarked, that, in many parts of this district, these advantages apply more forcefully to the case of the great farmer than the little one.”²³ Similarly, the 1844 *Report from the Committee on Commons Inclosure* affirmed the optimality of enclosure by reference to the increased rental value of enclosed

¹⁸ *Annals of Agriculture*, 16 (1791), p. 502.

¹⁹ A. Young, “An Inquiry into the Propriety of Applying Wastes to the Better Maintenance and Support of the Poor,” *Annals of Agriculture*, 36 (1801), p. 515; E. P. Hunt, *Arthur Young on Industry and Economics* (Bryn Mawr, 1926).

²⁰ J. Plymley, *A General View of the Agriculture of Shropshire* (London, 1813), p. 145.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² A. Pringle, *A General View of the Agriculture of the County of Westmoreland* (London, 1813), p. 354; Young, *General Report*, p. 12.

²³ Thomas Davis, *A General View of the Agriculture of the County of Wiltshire* (London, 1813), p. 40.

land, resulting from its improved productivity, independently of any change in the distribution of agricultural resources and income from them.²⁴

Modern welfare economics requires that the distributional implications of social change figure explicitly in any cost-benefit analysis. Some contemporaries were disturbed by the asymmetric distribution of the costs and benefits of enclosure, which they regarded as unnecessary, even seeing enclosure as a lost opportunity to reverse the trend towards landlessness. Arthur Young regretted that “instead of giving property to the poor, or preserving it, or enabling them to acquire it, the very contrary effect has taken place . . . and as this evil was by no means necessarily connected with the measure of enclosing, it was a mischief that might easily have been avoided.”²⁵

Clearly a cost-benefit analysis of enclosure ultimately involves a complex counterfactual. The issue explored here has more modest dimensions, though perhaps its investigation is a necessary input into the grander calculus: how valuable were common rights to the village poor, and how extensive were their losses on enclosure compared with other sources of family income? Valuation can be based on the rents charged for common rights when such rights were marketed, or by imputing values to the produce of common rights from the market prices of similar goods.

Let us begin with grazing rights. Common rights could be hired cheaply, especially in areas of poor pasture. Ten sheep could be kept for a whole year for sixpence in Westmoreland, and even in Wales, where the commons were better, fourpence per head per year was the going rate in 1808.²⁶ According to Young the privilege of stocking a common, worth only 10s to 12s if hired out, could provide claim to land which after enclosure had an annual value of £3 to £20.²⁷ But such comparisons, as Young himself acknowledged, missed the point as far as cottagers’ gains and losses are concerned. If a poor family was unable to stock the commons, the price at which the right was let need not indicate its value; and, second, as discussed above, rights legally or customarily enjoyed prior to enclosure were not necessarily effectively

²⁴ *Parliamentary Papers*, 5 (1844); for an excellent summary of the modern treatment of rent increases as a motive to enclose, see Michael Turner, *English Parliamentary Enclosure: Its Historical Geography and Economic History* (London, 1980), p. 98 ff. and references cited therein.

²⁵ Young, “An Inquiry,” p. 515; here Young anticipates the framework and conclusions, if not the method, of a recent comment on the welfare implications of enclosure. Nick von Tunzelmann’s use of dynamic optimization to evaluate actual and feasible time paths of consumption per head for industrializing Britain suggests that a less brutal pace of enclosure would not have retarded growth significantly, see his “The Standard of Living Debate and Optimal Economic Growth,” in Joel Mokyr, ed., *The Economics of the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1985).

²⁶ Young, *General Report*, pp. 3–4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

confirmed in enclosed villages.²⁸ Consequently here the emphasis is on the value of the products of cowkeeping.

Poor people themselves allegedly valued their cows at around 5s or 6s each per week, which compares favorably with the 7s to 8s that late eighteenth-century agricultural laborers could hope to earn, an order of magnitude confirmed by David Levine's recent description of a laborer's cow as "worth almost as much as his wages."²⁹ Participants in the debate on the efficiency of cottager cowkeeping, conducted by the Board of Agriculture in the 1790s and 1800s, provided detailed analyses of the costs and benefits of different systems, including direct comparisons of schemes dependent on the preservation of commons with schemes which employed enclosed cowkeepers. These assessments, summarized in Table 1, facilitate more detailed accounts.

Arthur Young's eulogy to the cow seems clearly vindicated. According to Mr. Kent's figures, with a decent cow producing six quarts of milk per day worth around a penny a quart in 1800, the revenue from sales of milk or butter, or from suckling calves, amounted to 3s 6d per week or £9 2s per year. The other estimates of receipts from sales of dairy produce are in the same range and although they fall short of the valuations quoted above, they remain significant compared with laborers' wages. On an annual basis the comparison would probably be even more favorable to cowkeeping: the agricultural laborer could expect disruptions to earnings from underemployment and unemployment in the winter months that were only partly offset by harvest overtime, whereas Mr. Kent's figures include an allowance for the cow's dry periods and variable milk yields.³⁰

Moreover these figures underestimate revenues because they do not include the many by-products of cowkeeping, which had considerable value within the cottager economy. Where possible these by-products have been valued. Their importance in raising the revenue from cowkeeping is shown in the third column of Table 1.

One important by-product was the skim milk left over from making butter. Milk was rarely available at prices affordable by the poor, especially during the high price years from 1795 to 1820, which might perhaps itself indicate that cowkeeping had declined.³¹ Milk provided a gratifying addition to the monotonous diet of the adult farm worker, but more importantly, it was crucial to the healthy development of laborers' children. No wonder that in their cost-benefit analyses of cowkeeping

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

²⁹ Young, "An Inquiry," p. 510; D. Levine, *Reproducing Families: The Political Economy of English Population History* (London, 1987), p. 67.

³⁰ "... setting the profit of the calf against the loss sustained when the cow is dry"; Mr. Kent's estimate appears as a footnote in Sir John Sinclair, "Observations on the Means of Enabling a Cottager to Keep A Cow," *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, 4 (1805), pp. 358–69.

³¹ Clapham, *An Economic History*, p. 496.

Lord Winchilsea, Mr. Crutchley, Sir John Sinclair, and Thomas Babington all mention the importance of milk for cottagers' children and its unavailability unless produced domestically. David Davies and Frederic Eden make the same point in their seminal accounts of working-class budgets at the end of the eighteenth century.³² John Burnett and J. C. Drummond and Anne Wilbraham, historians of the English diet, cite declining access to land as a factor in the deterioration of the diets of southern agricultural laborers.³³ Milk also provided the dressing needed to make potatoes palatable, and its greater availability in the north, perhaps linked to the lesser impact of enclosures, facilitated the use of oatmeal.³⁴

Milk, along with the means to keep a cow, was also important within the cottage smallholder's productive system. Skim milk could be fed to the pigs along with supernumerary potatoes, garden produce, and cow fodder. In winter sheep could be kept on the cow pasture and the dung from cows and sheep could be used to manure the arable or garden, or sold to the farmers for 15s a wagon load. Conservation and recycling made the cottager economy pay.³⁵

If we turn to costs, we find that cows themselves cost between £7 and £10 in the 1790s according to the Board of Agriculture. Neglecting feed and labor costs, a cow could pay for itself in about a year. As far as rents were concerned, common rights had been enjoyed gratis, whereas land allotted to the cottagers on enclosure figured in the determination of their rent and rates. Even if their common rights provided only a summer keep, with several neighboring open-field parishes it was possible to buy hay to feed the cows in winter. But with enclosure, particularly if this reduced grassland, hay became much more expensive and difficult to procure.³⁶ In the schemes discussed by the Board of Agriculture the laborers rented land, either for grazing or for arable on which to grow fodder, and so it is possible, given prevailing rents and the requisite volume of hay, turnips, and greenfeed, to estimate the extent to which having to rent land and buy hay reduced profits. As columns four and five in Table 1 show, paying for both summer and winter feed approximately halved profits.

³² David Davies, *The Case of Laborers in Husbandry* (New Brunswick, 1977); Frederic Morton Eden, *The State of the Poor* (London, 1928). See also the historians of diet: J. C. Drummond and A. Wilbraham, *The Englishman's Food: A History of Five Centuries of English Diet* (London, 1950); D. J. Oddy and D. S. Miller, eds., *The Making of the British Diet* (London, 1976); John Burnett, *Plenty and Want: A Social History of Diet in England from 1815 to the Present Day* (London, 1966).

³³ Burnett, *Plenty*, pp. 254–55; Drummond and Wilbraham, *The Englishman's Food*, p. 245.

³⁴ Burnett, *Plenty*, pp. 254–55; Drummond and Wilbraham, *The Englishman's Food*, pp. 247–48.

³⁵ Davis, *Wiltshire*, p. 41; "An Account of the Produce of Milk and Butter from a Cow, the Property of William Cramp of Lewes in the County of Sussex," *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, 5 (1801), pp. 122–25.

³⁶ Mr. Barker (to Lord Winchilsea), reported in Lord Winchilsea, "Cottages," *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, 1 (1797), p. 80.

TABLE 1
THE VALUE OF A COW

Author (date, location)	Annual Revenue from Butter and Milk or Suckling Calves	Other Gains	Rent and Other Costs	Net Profit per Cow
Winchilsea (1797, Rutland)	£8 6s 8d	Sheep in winter kept on cow pastures; skim milk for their children ^a	£4 0s 0d	£4 6s 8d
Brownlow (1796, Welton)	£7 0s 0d	Pig adds £2 to net profit; keep lambs ^b	£1 17s 6d plus 2½ tons of hay ^c	£7 2s 6d
Crutchley (1796, Burleigh)	£7 10s 0d from butter or £5 from suckling calves	Pigs kept on skim milk worth 18d per week; milk, butter, cheese, and bacon consumed at home; 2 sheep kept on summer pasture at 5s ^d	£3 15s 0d plus £1 0s 0d marketing cost ^e	£3 0s 0d
Babington (1795, na) ^f	na	Vegetables and pigs add £1 to £3 to net profit; milk consumed at home	na	£4 0s 0d to £8 0s 0d
Sinclair (1801, na)	£7	Hogs add at least another £3 to net profit ^g	£4 10s, plus labor costs, seeds, and so forth	£5 10s 0d
Kent (1801, na) ^h Vavasour (1801, Yorkshire)	£9 2s 0d na	na See ⁱ	na £9 ^j plus labor costs, seeds, and so forth	na £4 10s 0d

^a Sheep kept in winter on cow pasture at 2s 6d per sheep and the value of the skim milk used in the family is included in revenue here, but other dairy produce consumed at home is not. Thus Winchilsea believed that the figure for net profit per cow underestimated the real benefit to the family: “. . . those who manage well will clear about twenty-pence a week or £4 6s 8d per ann. by each cow . . . Certainly those who have a cow appear to be (in comparison with those who have none) much more than twenty-pence per week richer,” Lord Winchilsea, “Cottages,” *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, 1 (1797), pp. 77–78.

^b “Cottagers who keep a cow always keep a pig or two . . . the profit from thence is very considerable as a pig is maintained . . . by what else be thrown away; and a pig bought for 20s at midsummer will be worth £3 at Christmas,” Lord Brownlow, “Queries Concerning Cottagers,” *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, 1 (1797), p. 88.

^c Net profit here would be very sensitive to the price of hay.

^d The skim milk is assumed to be sold and included in the revenue figure in column 2, so to include the pigs too would involve an element of double counting; the 5s from pasturing sheep is all additional revenue. The family’s domestic consumption of bacon and dairy produce is not counted. See Mr. Crutchley, “Answers to the Queries Respecting Cottagers Renting Land,” *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, 1 (1797), pp. 93–96.

^e Crutchley includes £1 to cover the “trouble and expense” of marketing; this plus the relatively high rent reduces his net profit. See Crutchley, “Answers,” p. 94.

^f See Thomas Babington, “Account of Some Cottagers,” *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, 4 (1805), pp. 392–98.

TABLE 1—continued

^g The cow is maintained on the basis of three acres of arable land divided into four plots of three roods each and cultivated so as to feed and litter the cow year round and provide potatoes and grain for the family or for sale, milk for the children, some orchard produce, some food for the pigs, and some poultry and eggs. Sinclair estimates that his system of management would yield produce valued at £21 2s 0d. I have artificially separated the cow from the interrelated system of farming for purposes of comparison. Note that the value of the produce is only slightly less than the cottager's earnings from wage labor after deducting the 20 days' work which Sinclair estimated would be required in addition to the laborer's and his family's "by hours," Sir John Sinclair, "Observations on the Means of Enabling a Cottager to Keep a Cow," *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, 4 (1805), pp. 358–69.

^h Mr. Kent's estimate is reported by Sinclair, "Observations," pp. 362–63.

ⁱ Vavasour's cottager scheme in Yorkshire was also at least partially based on the arable cultivation of a small plot of land; cowkeeping was an integral part. Again I have tried to isolate the profit on a cow and set it against some relevant rental charges. Excluding the sales of butter, the profit on the land net of rent, seeds, and labor cost (ploughing) was estimated at £31 10s 0d and the family allegedly "made the rent in butter besides a little used in the family." But note that some of the produce undoubtedly went to feed the two cows and two pigs and so the value of the butter sales cannot just be added to the value of output without double counting, see Sir Henry Vavasour, "Case of a Cottager," *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, 4 (1805), pp. 632–63.

^j Includes house rent. The net return on hogs as joint products with butter production is included in net profit, but the accounts do not include the benefits derived from combining cowkeeping with some arable, for example, the availability of manure, Vavasour, "Case of a Cottager."

Source: *Communications to the Board of Agriculture* (London, select years, 1797–1805).

The obvious counterargument is that although the cowkeep in these schemes cost more than the maintenance associated with the open fields, it was a superior provision: a cow would fare better and be more productive. But the keep had to be much richer to compensate laborers newly required to pay rents. In many cases access to common grazing retained its edge, as reflected in several proposals for cottager cowkeeping. For example, Lord Winchilsea ranked various ways in which cottagers could find both summer and winter keep for a cow according to their efficiency. His most preferred option involved the possession of a sufficient quantity of enclosed grassland to enable one or more cows to be kept throughout the year. His second choice was enclosed summer pasture and some arable land on which to grow winter fodder. The third possibility entailed a "right of common for the summer keep and a meadow or arable or a meadow in common for the winter."³⁷ This possibility was held to be "nearly so advantageous as small enclosures," except that "nine commons out of ten are so much overstocked that the summer keep is bad," a disadvantage that was compounded if the meadow was also held in common.³⁸

Advocates of enclosure, ancient and modern, have depicted overstocking as an inevitable problem when land is held in common.³⁹ But there are many references to grazing where the number of animals to be

³⁷ Lord Winchilsea, "Cottages," p. 81.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Bailey and Cully, *Northumberland*, p. 236; Plymley, *Shropshire*, pp. 224–25.

kept at different times of the year was clearly specified, and once specified these “stints” were carefully policed. References also occur to clearly defined and well-regulated turbarry (rights to dig turf or peat) and estover (rights to cut wood).⁴⁰ Lord Brownlow’s description of actual cottager cowkeeping schemes contains one primarily based on common pasture which was carefully stinted.⁴¹ Here 13 out of 25 cottagers stocked the commons themselves, but the value of this well-regulated common is underlined by the other dozen’s ability to let their rights to the farmers “who are ready to hire them at a price equal at least to what they pay for houses and commons” (35s per year).⁴² Contrast these arrangements with those Brownlow (relatively) generously made available when newly enclosing, as summarized in Table 1. Here the 2.5 acres needed to keep a cow cost 15s per acre and the cottage with its less than one rood of garden another £2 10s per year.

The imposition of rent, rates, and higher prices for hay must have made some previously profitable cowkeeping uneconomic. But for many cottagers these calculations were irrelevant: cowkeeps were not made available on any terms. Even when legislation in 1819 and 1831 allowed parishes to obtain land for letting to the poor, and in 1832 enabled allotments to be set aside at enclosure, opposition from the farmers, high rents, and the use of unsuitable land limited the impact of such schemes.

What labor costs, here principally the opportunity cost in terms of wages forgone, did the cowkeeping cottager incur? Substantial under-employment and unemployment in many southern and southeastern agricultural districts might be thought to imply little real tension between the exploitation of the commons and the performance of locally available waged work, especially as laborers and their families were likely to minimize the opportunity costs of such self-employment by working in the evenings or on Sundays or by using the labor time of family members who were not working for wages: this latter response gave the commons labor force its characteristic age/sex composition, as discussed below. But wage-earning opportunities were sometimes sacrificed, much to the farmer’s chagrin: “If you give them work, they will tell you that they must go to look up their sheep, cut furzes, get their cow out of the pound, and perhaps say that they must take their horse to be shod that he might carry them to a horse race or a cricket

⁴⁰ Pringle, *Westmoreland*, p. 322; Giles, “Enclosure in Stockport,” pp. 87–88; this is not to deny that population growth put pressure on stint agreements, see Turner, *English Parliamentary Enclosure*, chap. 6.

⁴¹ Lord Brownlow, “Queries Concerning Cottagers,” *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, 1 (1797), p. 85.

⁴² *Ibid.*; for other evidence of the lucrative hiring out of common rights, see Pringle, *Westmoreland*, p. 321.

match.”⁴³ Perhaps the laborers preferred to spend time “sauntering after their cattle,” because the return to such activities exceeded the wage. Brownlow opposed laborers’ possession of arable land because “it takes up so much of their time that they will not go to labourers’ work at the times the farmers most want them; being, as I have often heard them say, better employed about their own business which if they neglected they lost more than their earnings as labourers.”⁴⁴

Before mechanization, at haymaking and harvest the farmers’ requirements could not be met from the local pool of day labor, and the wives and children of the laborers constituted an essential labor reserve, whose availability was often an implicit condition of hiring.⁴⁵ But the independence conferred by common rights had disruptive implications for agricultural relations of production and threatened the cereal farmers with inadequate labor reserves at key times in the seasonal cycle. The threat posed by an insufficiently elastic labor supply, which had long provided an incentive to the capitalist farmers of southern and southeastern districts to retain a pool of underemployed men and unemployed women, became more deadly as the cereal belt widened.⁴⁶ Crops ripening simultaneously over a wide area could disrupt interregional flows of labor and throw additional pressure on local labor markets. Under these circumstances farmers became increasingly intolerant of distractions from waged work. Laborers with livestock, with gardens, and with rights of turbarry and estover were not always at the farmers’ beck and call. Nor were their wives and children only a seasonal labor reserve readily mobilized out of want and worklessness.

The farmers castigated the commons for obstructing agricultural progress, but also for promoting indiscipline and indolence among the workers.⁴⁷ Captured by the farmers and their perspective, the Board of Agriculture set hopelessly incompatible objectives: to enable laborers to be independent when old or unemployed, without lessening their commitment to wage labor.

Sir John Sinclair’s principles for guiding the design of cowkeeping schemes illustrate the incompatibilities involved. The first principle,

⁴³ Arbuthnot, quoted in Ann Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 22–23.

⁴⁴ Brownlow, “Queries,” p. 86.

⁴⁵ E. J. T. Collins, “Labour Supply and Demand in European Agriculture, 1800–1880,” in E. L. Jones and S. J. Woolf, eds., *Agrarian Change and Economic Development: The Historical Problems* (London, 1969), pp. 61–94; *Parliamentary Papers*, 21–22 (1861).

⁴⁶ Levine, *Reproducing Families*, p. 67.

⁴⁷ For a modern orthodox perspective on the efficiency of open field agriculture, see D. N. McCloskey, “The Enclosure of Open Fields: Preface to a Study of its Impact on the Efficiency of English Agriculture in the Eighteenth Century,” this JOURNAL, 32 (Mar. 1972), pp. 15–35; but M. A. Havinden, “Agricultural Progress in Open Field Oxfordshire,” *Agricultural History Review*, 4 (1961), pp. 73–83, demonstrates that enclosure was not a necessary condition for progressive farming; the link between the commons and the discipline of agricultural labor is a major theme in Snell, *Annals*, p. 170 ff.

“that the cottager shall raise by his own labour some of the most material articles of subsistence for himself and his family,” and the second, “that he shall be enabled to supply the adjoining markets with the smaller agricultural productions,” surely clashed with the third, “that both he and his family shall have it in their power to assist the neighbouring farmers, at all seasons of the year, almost equally as well as if they had no land in their occupation.”⁴⁸ Significantly the Board reserved its accolades for schemes which minimized the disruptions to wage labor. Winchilsea preferred the possession of enclosed grassland because “except the haymaking, the rest of the business is done by his [the laborer’s] wife and his labour is not interrupted.”⁴⁹ But in many counties where the soil was not suited to grazing or where cereal production was replacing pasture, cowkeeping schemes had to involve some stall feeding with hay and vegetables. Basically there was not enough land to satisfy the demands of the farmers and leave enough over to enclose grassland for the cottagers. But the alternative of growing enough food for a cow was much more labor-intensive and in particular required both more male labor, as land had to be dug and ploughed, and more attention from other family members at harvest time coincident with the peak demands of the capitalist farmers.⁵⁰

Sinclair’s arable scheme required 558 hours, many of which were expected to come from the laborer’s free time, but as an extreme case he assumed that the digging, manuring, and harvesting required 20 entire days in addition to by-hours and the labor of unemployed family members. Allowing 60 days for Sundays and holidays, this still left 285 days for the ordinary hand labor of the cottager. To reduce further the potential interference with wage labor, digging was to be “diversified as much as possible so as not to interfere materially with the other occupations of the cottager,” and if even then “a cottager . . . could not work as a common daily labourer, he might at least answer, as a useful labourer by the piece,” an ominous conclusion from the farmers’ viewpoint.⁵¹ Henry Vavasour admired his Yorkshire cottager Mr. Rook primarily because he and his family cultivated their three acres “in their *spare* hours from their daily hired work with seldom a whole day off except in harvest.”⁵² But even here the mention of distractions at the

⁴⁸ Sinclair, “Observations,” pp. 358–59.

⁴⁹ Winchilsea, “Cottages,” p. 80.

⁵⁰ In Sir John Sinclair’s scheme the cow was maintained by arable farming, which “requires unquestionably more labour on the part of the cottager, and of his family: at the same time, the occupation of so great an extent of ground is not so necessary . . .,” “Observations,” p. 358.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

⁵² Winchilsea, “Cottages,” p. 80; Henry Vavasour, “Reference to the Flemish Manner,” *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, 4 (1805), p. 308.

busiest time of the agricultural year would suffice to make many employers blench.⁵³

Thus the growth of wage dependence which accompanied enclosure was not universally perceived as a drawback. The farmers actively welcomed it.⁵⁴ Disliking common rights precisely (if not solely) for the independence that they bestowed on laboring families, the farmers opposed the transfer of any functional equivalents into the post-enclosure relations of agricultural production.⁵⁵

Summarizing, then, for a family in the fortunate position of being able to keep a cow, by and large on common land, and assuming the opportunity cost of the labor involved, though not negligible, was minimized by the employment of underemployed family members and offset by the value of by-products such as skim milk and manure, then the annual income from the cow was often more than half the adult male laborer's wage and an average-priced cow would pay for itself in about a year. If after enclosure the family retained some access to a cowkeep, their rent was adjusted accordingly, and if food had to be grown on an enclosed plot of arable, the opportunity cost in terms of wages forgone was undoubtedly raised. This cut profits in half. But for the majority of families even this reduced rate of return was unavailable, as all possibility of cowkeeping was eliminated with enclosure.

Although the cow was often the lynchpin of the cottager system of management, families that did not have a cow could still benefit from common grazing. Horses, for example, were crucial to the participation of J. M. Martin's village traders in the extensive carrying trade between the Feldon and the nearby Warwickshire coalfield.⁵⁶ The tenement garden, though strictly speaking not a common right, often disappeared with enclosure and certainly had an enhanced value when combined with access to pasture. Winchilsea ranked possession of a right of common and a garden as the fourth most comfortable state for a laborer: "This is certainly very beneficial to them: geese and pigs can be kept upon the common and the latter fed with the produce of the garden and a small quantity of purchased food."⁵⁷ In the late 1790s a pig, bought for 20s at Michaelmas, would be worth £3 by Christmas, much of the difference being net profit because the pig was fed mainly on "what else

⁵³ See also D. C. Barnett, "Allotments and the Problem of Rural Poverty, 1780-1840," in E. L. Jones and G. E. Mingay, eds., *Land, Labour and Population in the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1967), pp. 162-86.

⁵⁴ Yelling, *Common Field*; Snell, *Annals*.

⁵⁵ Snell, *Annals*; Barnett, "Allotments." Note here too the farmers' apparent reluctance to encourage cowkeeping by selling hay to their laborers, a stance which Mr. Barclay argued against on the grounds that a laborer who was dependent on a farmer for hay would "keep more closely by his work." See Robert Barclay, "On Labourers in Husbandry Renting Land," *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, 1 (1797), pp. 91-92.

⁵⁶ Martin, "Village Traders."

⁵⁷ Winchilsea, "Cottages," p. 81.

be thrown away.”⁵⁸ In the northwest the commoners’ sheep could be sold for 9s to 13s per head and geese to the Yorkshire drovers at 1s 4d per head.⁵⁹ Their wool and their eggs could also be used domestically or sold on the local market.

Common rights other than pasture were also important. Laborers retained privileges in “the shrubs, woods, undergrowth, stone quarries and gravel pits, thereby obtaining fuel for cooking and wood for repairing houses, useful dietary supplements from the wild bird and animal life, crab apples and cob nuts from the hedgerows, brambles, whortles and juniper berries from the heaths, and mint, thyme, balm, tansy and other wild herbs from any other little patch of waste. . . . Almost every living thing in the parish however insignificant could be turned to some good use.”⁶⁰

Taxonomies of the products that could be hunted and gathered for consumption, or sale, or as the raw materials for some handicraft production, usually receive a condescending sneer. William Stevenson, in his survey of Surrey, observed the employment of women in cutting long heath to make besom brooms, from the sale of which they made 3s per week. Other women in the neighborhood gathered blueberries and whortleberries. He despised these activities as “miserable productions and trifling employments which the heaths in general afford.”⁶¹ Three shillings per week would amount to £7 16s per year, but assuming four weeks were lost in sickness and holidays, yearly earnings would be just over £7, which compares not unfavorably with what women could make in other employment.⁶² Self-employment was an *economic* option and its relative attractions increased with the probability of unemployment and irregular earnings. Moreover, children, who were a burden for women attempting wage labor, were a help in freelance gathering activities.

One product of the commons and wastes escaped the usual scorn: free fuel or its availability at opportunity cost was universally recognized as making a major difference in the poor family’s budget.⁶³ Sir John Sinclair’s cottager accounts, which conclude with a nominal surplus, carried the ominous caveat that fuel costs would “greatly affect” any

⁵⁸ Brownlow, “Queries,” p. 90.

⁵⁹ Pringle, *Westmoreland*.

⁶⁰ Alan Everitt, “Farm Labourers,” in Thirsk, ed., *Agrarian History*, pp. 396–465.

⁶¹ William Stevenson, *A General View of the Agriculture of the County of Surrey* (London, 1813), p. 459.

⁶² In his *Annals*, Keith Snell gives £5.20, £6.87, and £7.87 as average female earnings in Surrey, Kent, Essex, and Hertfordshire in 1801–5, 1806–10, and 1811–15. Of course, any one gathering activity would be unlikely to provide year-round employment, but different kinds of self-employment, often including cottage industry, could be patched together and integrated with domestic work and childcare.

⁶³ Pamela Horn, *Labouring Life in the Victorian Countryside* (Dublin, 1976).

actual surplus.⁶⁴ Cobbett believed that abundance of fuel gave woodlanders significant advantage over laboring families elsewhere. But even in open country whatever could be scavenged rather than purchased was gratefully exploited. The main fuels were peat and wood, but those who could do no better burned sticks collected from hedgerows and copses, supplemented with large quantities of cow and horse dung. On islands and along the coast seaweed was burned; inland, depending on the local vegetation, they would cut heather, broom, furze, and gorse.⁶⁵ More or less anything that women and children could gather was burned.

A Mr. Keen, in testimony to the 1844 Committee on Commons' Inclosure, reported fuel costs in Godalming in Surrey, enclosed some 35 years previously.⁶⁶ Keen figured that the annual fuel consumption of a town cottager with four rooms was about two tons of coal and 100 faggots, which, in Godalming, cost £3 4s and £1 0s 10d respectively, or £4 4s 10d altogether. As the cottager could sell the ashes back to the farmer for 12s 6d, annual net fuel costs were about £3 12s 4d. As Godalming stood at the extreme point of coal supply lines, this probably represented a maximum cost. More generally coal was available at around 20s a ton, and faggots at 12s a hundred, so that 50s per annum was nearer the average cost to a laborer "not having the advantage of cutting his fuel."⁶⁷

According to Keen, the laborer who did exercise rights of turbarry seldom cut the fuel himself but "hired those who are not fortunate enough to be in constant work" to do it at 2s per 1,000 turfs. Given a requirement of 5,000 to 8,000 turfs per year, fuel cost at most 20s, plus the cost of faggots and the carting, which the laborer often obtained free in return for the ashes.

Generally the difference between buying coal and cutting turf worked out at about £1 per year, but the saving was more where coal was especially expensive or where family members cut the fuel in their spare time. Even the conservatively estimated saving of 20s per year was not insubstantial compared with laborers' wages.

The Hammonds arrived at a similar evaluation of common rights to fuel based on David Davies's working-class budgets. They assumed that a man could cut enough fuel in a week to provide for his family for about a year and that the week's wages forgone were 10s. The value of the fuel, as imputed from market equivalents in southern counties, averaged £2 8s. So the net gain from the week's work was around £1 18s, a princely reward by agricultural laborers' standards in the late eighteenth century. The Hammonds noted that "it must be remembered that the

⁶⁴ Sinclair, "Observations," p. 364.

⁶⁵ William Cobbett, *Rural Rides* (London, 1922); Caroline Davidson, *A Woman's Work is Never Done: A History of Housework in the British Isles, 1650-1950* (London, 1982).

⁶⁶ *Parliamentary Papers, Commons Inclosure*, p. 55ff.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

10s opportunity cost is calculated on the assumption that the man would otherwise be working whereas in reality he could cut his turf in slack times and in odd hours when there was no money to be made by working for someone else."⁶⁸ Alternatively women and children could cut the turf when they had no waged work.

Suggestions that the land on which common rights of turbary were exercised should be sold to establish a "coal fund" to which the needy might apply were popular with the farmers, partly because they transformed a right into a charitable donation, available only at the discretion of the fund's administrators and undoubtedly conditional on the applicants' "characters" and "behavior."⁶⁹ In his testimony before the Committee on Commons Inclosure Mr. Keen resisted this idea, arguing that, if regulated, turf cutting was an efficient system. The chairman's intervention to the effect that cottagers would be better off with less fuel, as their "immoderate grates" were the cause of frequent accidents, typifies the class-biased casuistry of this committee.⁷⁰

One final benefit that the poor commonly enjoyed in rural England was the right to glean. Gleaning was not strictly linked to common rights, and could operate over enclosed fields, but with more difficulty than over open ones, and it meant nothing if the land was converted to pasture. So it too was threatened by enclosure. The agricultural laborers themselves, and those commentators who appreciated the cottager economy, testified that particularly at times of scarcity and high prices, "in its small way [gleaning] . . . contributed much to the benefit of the poor."⁷¹

Working people's defense of the right to glean confirms that significant returns were involved, while the farmers' opposition illustrates again the hostility and suspicion of class relations in the countryside. In wheat, gleaning constituted a cleaning operation and was beneficial to the farmers. Consequently prosecutions were rare, although farmers opposed gleaning until the fields were cleared completely in case the temptation to rob the stooks proved too great. With barley and beans the situation was different and almost all court cases refer to them.

Barley and beans were used as livestock feed and access to their waste encouraged laborers to keep animals. Apart from the anxiety that if workers owned animals they would be distracted and undisciplined, farmers also worried that when the stock of harvest gleanings was

⁶⁸ Hammond and Hammond, *Village Labourer*, p. 107.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 129; Wrightson, *English Society*, p. 175.

⁷⁰ *Parliamentary Papers, Commons Inclosure*, p. 77.

⁷¹ Yelling, *Common Field*, p. 227; Martin, "Village Traders," p. 183, quotes Homer to the effect that gleaning rights were a "special boon" to the cottagers precisely because the product did not vary with good or bad harvests and so was "most advantageous when most wanted to be so."

exhausted, laborers would pilfer from their barns and granaries.⁷² Barley was also often undersown with grass to provide grazing for sheep or cattle in the few short weeks between harvest and autumn frosts. Animals could not be let into fields where gleaning was in process and the farmers chafed at such constraints.

Again it is possible to impute fairly precise values to gleaning. Witness the circumstances of a laboring family reported in 1795. The father earned only 7s or 8s a week plus his food during the harvest month. The family grew its own potatoes and was allowed a ton of coal from the parish. With wheat costing 13s 6d per bushel and the family's minimal consumption reduced to half a bushel, the wife's gleaning of three or four bushels, though it might not prevent her children from going hungry, was an important contribution. Even if it took her the whole harvest month to salvage the three or four bushels, her imputed weekly earnings were almost twice as high as the normal earnings of her husband.⁷³

In some places gleaning was even more rewarding. At Rode in Northamptonshire, for example, several families allegedly gathered enough wheat to keep themselves in bread for the whole year and as many beans as they needed to keep a pig.⁷⁴ Ivy Pinchbeck gives five or six bushels as the amount that a woman herself could usually glean.⁷⁵ Including the contribution of other family members, when a bushel of wheat costs almost double the weekly wages of a farm laborer, the gains were vital within the family economy.

WOMEN AND ENCLOSURE: USING HOURS THAT WOULD "BE OTHERWISE
WORSE THAN LOST"

Women have figured frequently in these descriptions of the mobilization of common resources. It is now more than fifty years since Ivy Pinchbeck first suggested that enclosures limited the opportunities available to working women and increased their dependence on husbands, fathers, and the poor rates.⁷⁶ Since then a more general debate about the effects of industrialization and the transition to capitalism on the welfare and status of women has rumbled on, usually in the pages of feminist or radical journals, but occasionally erupting into the main-

⁷² David H. Morgan notes that on some farms, laborers, particularly those with access to stocks, were prohibited from keeping pigs and poultry; see "The Place of Harvesters in Nineteenth-Century Village Life," in Raphael Samuel, ed., *Village Life and Labour* (London, 1975), pp. 27-72.

⁷³ E. Harries, "Letter," *Annals of Agriculture*, 25 (1796), p. 488; Jennie Kitteringham, "Country Work Girls in Nineteenth-Century England," in Samuel, ed., *Village Life*, pp. 73-139, also suggests that, with hard work, it was possible to glean enough to supply bread for a family during the winter months.

⁷⁴ Eden, *State of the Poor*, p. 547.

⁷⁵ Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution* (New York, 1969).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

stream.⁷⁷ One school of thought, the optimists, have emphasized alleged employment gains and derived improvements in women's status within the family. They contrast this with the harsh conditions of life for women and patriarchal culture of precapitalism.⁷⁸ The opposing school of thought, the pessimists, have argued that the transition to capitalism in Britain limited women's economic options, crystallized the division of labor between paid and unpaid work, exaggerated sex segmentation in the former, and reduced women's participation in wage labor, trends only reversed in the twentieth century.⁷⁹ In contrast they emphasize the rude egalitarianism implicit in the shared work and tough conditions of the feudal era. Much (too much) of this debate has focused on the experiences of women in the early factories of the industrial revolution, particularly in textiles and pottery.

More recently women workers in other sectors have received attention.⁸⁰ But despite the revived interest of historians, until K. D. M. Snell's recent monograph the particular links between enclosure and these trends have been neglected.⁸¹ Instead, changes in technology and the organization of production or, more convincingly, women's historically specific biological responsibilities for children were cited as shaping women's economic roles. Early modern mothering did not readily combine with capitalist wage labor.⁸²

In precapitalist production the domestic and production units were partially fused, allegedly facilitating the combination of pregnancy and nursing with women's work in a wide variety of agricultural and industrial tasks. Capitalist development eroded the imbrication of domestic and production activities. Labor was intensified, effort was concentrated, and the workday and workplace were formalized. There were no spontaneous pauses in which to nurse and babies were banished

⁷⁷ For an excellent survey of this debate, see Janet Thomas, "Women and Capitalism: Oppression or Emancipation? A Review Article," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30 (1988), pp. 534-49.

⁷⁸ For the important references, see *ibid.*

⁷⁹ Eric Richards, "Women in the British Economy since about 1700: An Interpretation," *History*, 59 (Oct. 1974), pp. 337-57; Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (New York, 1978); D. C. Baines, "The Labour Supply and the Labour Market, 1860-1914," in Roderick Floud and Donald McCloskey, eds., *The Economic History of Britain Since 1700* (Cambridge, 1981); K. D. M. Snell, "Agricultural Seasonal Unemployment, the Standard of Living and Women's Work in the South and East, 1690-1860," *Economic History Review*, 34 (Aug. 1981), pp. 407-37; George Joseph, *Women at Work* (Oxford, 1983).

⁸⁰ For example, Kitteringham, "Country Work Girls"; Kussmaul, *Servants*.

⁸¹ Snell, *Annals*.

⁸² Modern research confirms fragmentary historical evidence suggesting that in the absence of facilities for bottle-feeding, sterilization equipment, appropriate food, and pure water, breastfeeding was essential for infant survival, see UNICEF, *The World's Children* (Paris, 1978); Joanna Brenner and Maria Ramas, "Rethinking Women's Oppression," *New Left Review*, 144 (Mar.-Apr. 1981), pp. 33-71; Jane Humphries, "The Sexual Division of Labour and Social Control: An Interpretation," *Review of Radical Political Economics* (forthcoming).

from workshops and factories. Wives and mothers found it increasingly difficult to participate in the ascendant mode of work.

Changes in the organization of agricultural production produced analogous tensions. In eighteenth-century England the daughters of agricultural laborers hired themselves out annually as servants in husbandry, or more rarely, sought wage labor. After marriage, with the critical exceptions of haymaking and harvest, waged work was infrequent. Thus in a sample of 120 laboring families, the mother/wife on average contributed only 7 percent of family income, mainly from harvest earnings.⁸³ Similarly, responses to the Poor Law Authorities' investigation of the availability and remuneration of employment for women and children in 1834 suggest, first, that there was little continuous agricultural work available, and, second, that married women with children were not thought (at least by the responding officials) to be in a position to undertake regular wage labor. If such attitudes influenced the distribution of relief, they may have played a role in laboring families' ability not to send wives/mothers out to work as day laborers.⁸⁴

But this does not mean that these women did not work. As Pinchbeck argued, the commons, along with cottage industry (the two often being combined in the cottager economy), allowed wives and mothers to augment their families' resources without recourse to regular wage labor. Women could more easily combine self-employment than early capitalist wage labor with the care and nourishment of their children. C. T. Haden, a contemporary expert on childhood diseases, emphasized that poor mothers organized their work so as not to interfere with their nursing, and their nursing so as not to interfere with their work.⁸⁵ In contrast, agricultural wage labor often required work far from home, for specific hours, and without interruption. Working at or from home, women could also utilize the labor of their children, transmit skills, and keep a watchful eye on the chance encounters of their growing daughters.

In this context, many gathering, scavenging, and processing activities, as well as the care of livestock and the cultivation of a garden, were relatively rewarding. Remember that women's wages in agriculture

⁸³ Eden, *The State of the Poor*; Davies, *The Case of Labourers*. Data for a group of families in Lincolnshire in 1868 also suggests that the harvest earnings of women represented about 7 percent of annual income. But these women were able to work for additional wages in the spring, increasing their yearly contribution to 12 to 14 percent. Inclusion of the harvest earnings of children boosted the contribution of autumnal wages to around one-seventh of the whole livelihood: see Horn, *Labouring Life in the Victorian Countryside*. Recasting David Morgan's judgment in terms of rural families, not individual workers, such earnings could indeed be the key to survival, "The Place of Harvesters," p. 38.

⁸⁴ "Report from his Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Operation of the Poor Laws in England and Wales: Appendix B 1," *Parliamentary Papers*, 30 (1834).

⁸⁵ C. T. Haden, *Practical Observations on the Management and Disease of Children* (London, 1827), pp. 24, 124.

were only one-half to two-thirds the male wage and sometimes even lower. Moreover, despite the comments of many contemporaries, eking out a livelihood on the commons was no more risky than wage labor. Diversity and flexibility could be built into self-employment, whereas the eighteenth century saw a long-term reduction in women's work in the southeastern counties and a decline in yearly hiring as employers responded to the settlement laws by shortening tenures and increasing turnover. The long-term reduction in women's work in the southeastern counties made their wage labor more uncertain.⁸⁶

So, as in many parts of the Third World today, proletarianization took the form of the husband/father working for wages, while the wife/mother and the children added, often significantly, to family subsistence by exploiting traditional rights to rural resources. The husband/father sometimes also made nonwage contributions to the family's livelihood, and the wife/mother and the children frequently also contributed wages earned at harvest and haymaking, or more regularly if the age-sex composition of the family facilitated their employment and work was available. What evidence is there to support this hypothesis?

If women, in particular, gained from the commons and wastes, they would surely have figured in the popular opposition to enclosure. The evidence suggests that they did.⁸⁷ Remember it was a few old *women* whom Arthur Young identified as implacably opposed to enclosure in Sussex. Perhaps their opposition had less to do with "singularity" than self-interest. Women also appeared frequently in court proceedings against gleaners.⁸⁸

There is also direct evidence that it was women specifically who exploited the opportunities of the commons. Women exploited common grazing as an alternative to charity, the poor law, or burdening their children.⁸⁹ The widow and her cow were probably as common in reality as they are in fairy tales. Z, the son of a stable-helper and laborer, who appears in Briscoe Eyre's accounts of life in the New Forest, derived a double advantage from the local common. It provided both a summer keep for his own three cows and enabled his widowed mother to remain independent by keeping a cow and a pig, "almost entirely on the common."⁹⁰

Widows' traditional recourse to cowkeeping was even institutionalized as a public panacea for feminized poverty. The guardians often

⁸⁶ Pinchbeck, *Women*; Kussmaul, *Servants*; Snell, *Annals*.

⁸⁷ Hammond and Hammond, *The Village Labourer*; Hobsbawm and Rude, *Captain Swing*; Wrightson, *English Society*.

⁸⁸ Morgan, "The Place of Harvesters," p. 58.

⁸⁹ Pinchbeck, *Women*.

⁹⁰ G. E. Briscoe Eyre, *The New Forest, Its Common Rights and Cottage Stock-Keepers* (Lyndhurst, 1883), pp. 54–55.

purchased cows for older women to try to keep them off the rates.⁹¹ But for the cow to be a functional equivalent for social security, continued access to land was required: hence the significance of the commons to this section of the rural population.

The tradition of using the underemployed or low-paid labor of women in milking and buttermaking characterized the Board of Agriculture's schemes for cowkeeping by the rural poor. It was emphasized by proponents as reducing the labor demands on husbands and fathers, and so less likely to interfere with the supply of day labor to capitalist farms. "The wives and daughters milk and manage the cows, with occasional assistance from their husbands; but the latter are not prevented from working for their masters the farmers, or pursuing their trades, with great regularity through the year, except for about a week in hay harvest; and a few days at other times, when the carrying of their manure or some other work that the women cannot perform demands their attention."⁹²

Such arrangements were touted as ideal. The employer gained because cow or allotment-keeping cottagers ate better and so worked harder for the same wages. The husband would "think himself extremely happy if, while he was working for his rich neighbor . . . his wife could be employed at home in managing a cow and a pig."⁹³ Society at large benefited by usefully filling the spare time of the laborers: "they are still more benefitted by the improvement of their habits, than they are by the increase of their comforts. When they have a little spare time the men go off to their land and their stock, rather than to the alehouse; and the women employ many hours in the care of their cows and dairies, which would be otherwise worse than lost in idleness and gossip."⁹⁴

Women's readiness to mobilize rural resources is also reflected in their primary responsibility for cottage gardens.⁹⁵ Jane Millward, a collier's wife, developed a prizewinning scheme for cultivating about 1.5 acres, and she did so in the course of bearing and rearing 11 chil-

⁹¹ Winchilsea, "Cottages," p. 78; Pinchbeck, *Women*.

⁹² Mr. Crutchley, "Answers to the Queries Respecting Cottagers Renting Land," *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, 1 (1797), p. 94.

⁹³ Thomas Thompson, "Reasons for Giving Lands to Cottagers to Enable them to Keep Cows," *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, 4 (1805), p. 427.

⁹⁴ Thomas Babington, "Account of Some Cottagers," *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, 4 (1805), p. 394. Social benefits significantly collapsed into benefits to ratepayers. The Board of Agriculture's schemes were intended to reduce applications for relief, and similarly Arthur Young's calculations of the costs and benefits were in terms of the impact on poor law expenditures. The logic was impeccable: if families' incomes were not to be supplemented from the rates, and if wages were not to increase, underemployed women and children had to be found work.

⁹⁵ Pinchbeck, *Women*.

dren!⁹⁶ Nor were women's efforts directed only to raising food for family consumption. They often grew cash crops and projects could expand into the cultivation of common land. For example, hemp growing in allotments on the commons took "the place of poultry rearing as a recognised source of income for women" in parts of Dorset in the late 1700s.⁹⁷

Women also predominate in accounts of gathering and scavenging activities associated with the commons and wastes. The berry gatherers and besom makers of Surrey were women. Women and girls, in gangs and independently, cockled and musselled around the Lancashire coast and along the shores of the Wash. Although all family members took pride in their pig, mothers and children were particularly creative in their use of humble resources in its fattening. Reflecting on her Norfolk childhood, one woman remembered going with her mother to gather "all the food that was for free: watercress from running streams, rabbits, pigeons, wild raspberries, wild plums and blackberries, crabapples, hazel nuts, chestnuts, walnuts. No squirrels hoarded these more carefully than we did . . ."⁹⁸

Women were also the principal gatherers of fuel: in Cornwall they would cut furze in early summer from thickets up to ten feet high, in the Midlands collect straw and stubble, and in Surrey bring home prodigious loads of wood or sacks of fir cones picked up in the woods a mile or more away.⁹⁹ And they combined this with other responsibilities: George Sturt remembered meeting women bent nearly double under loads of fire wood, "toiling painfully along, with hats or bonnets pushed awry . . . occasionally tiny urchins, too small to be left at home alone, would be clinging to their mothers' frocks."¹⁰⁰ The preparation of peat, which was burned in many counties, was a family enterprise, but women and children usually performed the drying and stacking operations, and in some districts peat was transported home on women's backs.

Gleaning was also women's work. In reality a far from picturesque activity, it must have been exhausting coming immediately after women's harvest work. As with harvesting and other gathering activities, women could combine gleaning with childcare. Indeed the assistance provided by older children was essential if the opportunities in the harvest waste were to be exhausted. Flora Thompson's description of

⁹⁶ Sir William Pulteney, "Account of a Cottager," *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, 4 (1805), p. 344.

⁹⁷ Barbara Kerr, *Bound to the Soil: A Social History of Dorset, 1750-1918* (London, 1968), pp. 80-81.

⁹⁸ Norfolk Federation of Women's Institutes, *Within Living Memory*, quoted in Horn, *Labouring Life*, p. 30.

⁹⁹ See Davidson, *Woman's Work*.

¹⁰⁰ George Sturt, *Change in the Village* (London, 1912), p. 23.

the back-breaking work, the need for “well-disciplined” children, the suckling of babies in the rest hour, and the pride in women and children’s “little bit o’ leazings,” vividly captures the conditions and importance of this almost forgotten female labor.¹⁰¹

But if commons and wastes were mainly exploited by women and children, whose labor was not regularly required by or supplied to the capitalist farms, how can the loss of common rights be causally linked to proletarianization? First, the elimination of nonwage sources of survival increased dependence on wages and wage-earners. The implications for labor discipline and intrafamily relationships were far-reaching. Second, the closure of options other than wage labor ensured women’s availability for employment, if and when they were needed. Here the emphasis has been on large seasonal fluctuations in demand for agricultural labor in the context of an unmechanized harvest, but the loss of common rights also made women more readily available for domestic, proto-industrial, and industrial work.¹⁰² Without access to rural resources, children too could contribute only through waged work, and were more likely to be “put out to labor *early*.”¹⁰³

In contrast, by providing some members of the laborer’s family with alternatives to wage labor, the commons liberated them from the beck and call of the farmers. Access to other sources of subsistence meant that, in the short term at least, a wageless laborer would not starve. Nor would his family. In the terms of the times these were not paltry degrees of freedom.

CONCLUSION

Proletarianization has been interpreted ahistorically as the transformation of self-sufficient peasants into breadwinning wage laborers. The overwhelming emphasis has been on the male experience. But in reality survival seldom depends on a single breadwinner: a family’s subsistence derived from the productive contributions of all its members. Proletarianization was a gradual process whereby access to resources other than wages was slowly eliminated. Employers’ interests in the development of proletarianization, directly motivated by seasonal and sectoral variations in the demand for labor, necessarily spilled over into interests in intrafamily patterns of dependence and support. The dependence of whole families on wages ensured a sufficiently elastic labor supply to cope with an unmechanized harvest. The dependence of whole families

¹⁰¹ Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford* (London, 1954), p. 14.

¹⁰² Plymley’s views are typical: “the commons operates upon their minds as a sort of independence: this idea leads the man to lose many days work by which he gets a habit of indolence: a daughter kept at home to milk a poor half-starved cow, who being open to temptation soon turns harlot, and becomes a distressed ignorant mother instead of making a useful servant.” *Shropshire*, p. 225.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 225, his emphasis.

on wage earners strengthened discipline and commitment: to be a good husband or father it became necessary to be a good wage earner.

Not surprisingly then, proletarianization was uneven and particularized in its impact on different family members. Here I have emphasized the specific implications for women of the loss of certain rural resources. I have shown hitherto despised activities and denigrated resources to have had historical significance. In the light of the experience of wives and mothers, historians should revise their view of the value of the commons, and, incidentally, the role of enclosures in the genesis of wage labor. But there is more at stake than a partial rehabilitation of Marx. An analysis of the links among enclosure, common rights, and wage dependence which attends to the experience of women is not just more complete and more conceptually sophisticated. It is better history.