

# John Holt and *The general view of the agriculture of the county of Lancaster*: An appraisal

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One of the current, long-standing historical debates in agricultural history, despite over a century of usage, is the relevance of the term 'agricultural revolution'. The term was first used by R. E. Prothero (later Lord Ernle) in an article of 1885, later expanded in 1888 into a book.<sup>1</sup> Revisionist historians, such as Kerridge, Jones, Chambers and Mingay presented cases for earlier and different periods of important agricultural change and debated whether the word 'revolution' was appropriate for what were relatively slow changes, leading to Thirsk even proposing that the term should be abandoned.<sup>2</sup> It was then re-invigorated by Overton who presented a case for re-establishing the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as being a crucial period of agricultural advance in England meriting the use of the term.<sup>3</sup> Overton's counter-revisionism was rejected by Allen, who identified two alternative periods of major improvements in agricultural output and productivity and claimed that the late eighteenth century was remarkable for its stagnation.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The pioneers and progress of English farming* (London, 1988): this was the forerunner of Ernle's famous *English farming past and present* (London, 1912).

<sup>2</sup> E. Kerridge, *The agricultural revolution* (London, 1967); E. L. Jones, *Agriculture and the industrial revolution* (Oxford, 1967); J. D. Chambers & G. E. Mingay, *The agricultural revolution 1750–1880* (London 1966); J. Thirsk, *England's agricultural regions and agrarian history 1500–1750* (London, 1987), pp. 56–61.

<sup>3</sup> M. Overton, 'Re-establishing the English agricultural revolution', *Agricultural History Review*, 44 (1996), pp. 1–20.

<sup>4</sup> R. C. Allen, 'Tracking the agricultural revolution in England', *Economic History Review*, 52 (1999), pp. 209–35.

Ernle's 'classical' agricultural revolution was based upon the importance of developments in four key areas and the influence of individuals in promoting them. These were innovation in agricultural implements (Jethro Tull), developments in stock breeding (Robert Bakewell), introduction of new crops (Lord 'Turnip' Townshend) and the dissemination of new knowledge (Arthur Young). The late eighteenth century was certainly not a period of stagnation in attempts to spread agricultural knowledge both through the publication of books and journals and the establishment of agricultural societies. Important amongst these was the series of reports on the state of agriculture in the different counties issued by the Board of Agriculture. These reports have been described as 'flawed but invaluable'.<sup>5</sup> The report on Lancashire, written by John Holt, is a fundamental source used by any researcher working on eighteenth century farming history in the county and is frequently quoted.<sup>6</sup> Holt's report was heavily criticised by William Marshall in his assessment of the county reports, although as Mingay has said Marshall was 'the Board's sternest critic', and Lord Ernle described Marshall as 'an embittered, disappointed man'.<sup>7</sup> Marshall's opinion may therefore be thought to be not totally objective. In this paper an attempt is made to review the work of Holt, to reach an objective assessment of his report and to discuss its value both to contemporary farmers and agricultural historians.

Lancashire has traditionally been considered as a backward county agriculturally, especially due to the writings of

<sup>5</sup> G. E. Mingay, ed., *The agrarian history of England and Wales* vol. 6, 1750–1850 (Cambridge, 1989), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Victoria history of the county of Lancashire*, vol. 2, pp. 424–26; T. W. Fletcher, 'The agrarian revolution in arable Lancashire', *Transactions of the Lancashire & Cheshire Antiquarian Society (TLCAS)*, 122 (1962), pp. 17–42; J. D. Marshall, 'The Lancashire rural labourer in the early nineteenth century', *TLCAS*, 71 (1961), pp. 90–128; J. P. Dodd, 'South Lancashire in transition: A study of the crop returns for 1795–1801', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire & Cheshire (THSLC)*, 117 (1965), pp. 89–107; M. Winstanley, 'Industrialization and the small farm: Family and household economy in nineteenth-century Lancashire', *Past and Present*, 192 (1996), pp. 157–95; A. Mutch, *Rural life in south west Lancashire* (Lancaster, 1988); A. J. Gritt, 'Aspects of agrarian change in south-west Lancashire c. 1650–1850' (PhD, Univ. of Central Lancashire, 2000); J. M. Virgoe, 'Rural south west Lancashire in the eighteenth century: The land and the people' (PhD, Univ. of Liverpool, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> G. E. Mingay, *English landed society in the eighteenth century* (London, 1963); Ernle, *English farming past and present* (London, 1961 edn), p. 196.

mid-nineteenth century commentators. Rawsthorne questioned why Lancashire farming was inferior despite having good soil and several agricultural institutions.<sup>8</sup> He concluded that an important reason was that Lancashire had a mainly manufacturing population who could earn good wages and therefore had little incentive to work in agriculture. Garnett was scathing about rural people, considering that the growing towns had attracted capital, enterprise and the more intelligent people, leaving behind in the countryside those who were happy to live and die as their forefathers had before them.<sup>9</sup> Binns shared this view considering the county to be in 'a state of ignorance and indifference'.<sup>10</sup> Yet in the eighteenth century Lancashire had a number of important improving agricultural landlords, such as Thomas Fleetwood, Nicholas Blundell, Basil Thomas Eccleston and his son, Thomas Eccleston.<sup>11</sup> What is apparent is that Lancashire agriculture was diverse with considerable differences in different parts of the county, but that no part conformed to the accepted view of progressive agriculture based on large-scale corn production. More recently attempts have been made to revise the traditional view, emphasising that Lancashire agriculture is not backward, but different.<sup>12</sup> This paper examines the background to Holt's contribution to these discussions, their reliability and the use to which they have been put.

John Holt was born in 1743 at Hattersley, near Mottram in Longendale, Cheshire, about six miles north east of Stockport. About 1757 he moved to Walton on the Hill near Liverpool, where he became the parish clerk, a surveyor of the highways and master of the free grammar school.<sup>13</sup> In 1767 he married Elizabeth France of Walton but the marriage was childless. His interests were

<sup>8</sup> L. Rawsthorne, *Lancashire agriculture* (Penwortham, 1843).

<sup>9</sup> W. J. Garnett, *Report on the farming of Lancashire* (Preston, 1843).

<sup>10</sup> J. Binns, *Notes on the agriculture of Lancashire with suggestions for its improvement* (Preston, 1851).

<sup>11</sup> J. Virgoe, 'Thomas Fleetwood and the draining of Martin Mere', *THSLC*, 152 (2003), pp. 27–49; F. Tyrer, ed. *The great diurnal of Nicholas Blundell of Little Crosby, Lancashire 1702–1728*, Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, 3 vols (1968–72); A. J. Gritt & J. M. Virgoe with C. P. Brownrigg, eds, *The memoranda books of Basil Thomas Eccleston, 1757–1789*, Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire (2004).

<sup>12</sup> Winstanley, 'Industrialisation and the small farm'; Gritt, 'Aspects of agrarian change'; Virgoe, 'Rural south west Lancashire'.

<sup>13</sup> *Dictionary of national biography*, vol. 9, pp. 1,099–1,100.

literary and historical and he wrote many articles for the *Gentleman's Magazine* and a three-volume work on the Kings and Queens of England. His articles for the *Gentleman's Magazine* cover a period of sixteen years and illustrate the range of his interests. They included numerous monthly diaries on the weather over a period of ten years from 1791 to 1801, in which he records not only wind strength and direction, temperature, barometric pressure and monthly rainfall but also a wide range of observations on natural history including the date of flowering of certain plants, sighting of the first swallow and the singing of the cuckoo.<sup>14</sup> These items show him to be a sharp observer and meticulous recorder of his observations. Other articles included details of a trip by post chaise to London, the establishment of the Athenaeum Club in Liverpool, and an article on gravelled roads.<sup>15</sup> Only one item had any connection with farming, being a short article on a visit to Robert Bakewell's Dishley Farm near Loughborough, Leicestershire.<sup>16</sup> He collected material for a proposed history of Liverpool, but this was not published before his death in 1801; the collection was left to Matthew Gregson and is today deposited in the Liverpool Record Office as the Holt and Gregson Papers.<sup>17</sup>

From this background Holt may be considered to be a strange choice to be selected to write an important publication on Lancashire agriculture. Research into Holt's work on the Lancashire report is handicapped because none of his original papers on the project seem to have survived. Nor, despite a detailed search in estate papers have relevant papers been found in other estate collections with the exception of those found in the Scarisbrick papers and quoted later in this article.

In order to put Holt's *General view* in context it is helpful to have an appreciation of the background leading up to the establishment of the Board of Agriculture, which was set up in 1793 through Sir John Sinclair asking Pitt, the Prime Minister, to set up a board under his control. This was reluctantly granted by Pitt as a sop to Sinclair

<sup>14</sup> For example, meteorological diaries for April, May, June, July Aug., Sept., Oct. and Nov. 1791 in *Gentleman's Magazine*, 61(1) (1791); May, June, Aug. and Nov. 1792, 62(1) (1792); Apr. 1799, 69(1) (1799).

<sup>15</sup> *Gentleman's Magazine*, 63(2) (1793), pp. 619–21; 70(2) (1800), pp. 934–37, 1,048; 55(1) (1785), p. 322.

<sup>16</sup> *Gentleman's Magazine*, 63(2) (1793), pp. 792–95.

<sup>17</sup> Liverpool Record Office, 942 HOL.

after the latter had suggested a solution to government financial problems arising in early 1793.<sup>18</sup> During the second half of the eighteenth century a number of writers had considered that the government should take direct involvement in promoting agricultural improvement.<sup>19</sup> Sinclair claimed that he had originally conceived the idea following a tour through northern Europe in 1786, when he became set upon making the information he had picked up available to a wider audience, but he received a cool reception in Parliament. The concept was revived in his mind in 1790, when following the presentation to Parliament of a report on the *History of the public revenue of the British Empire*, he realised that the current information was defective and he saw the need to collect better data.

Following a meeting of the General Assembly of the Clergy of the Church of Scotland (of which Sinclair was a lay member) at which the notion was favourably received, he put his idea into practice by starting a Statistical Account of Scotland. He was further influenced by the need to publicise the findings of the British Wool Society on the management of sheep to ensure improvements, and in December 1792 he became determined to set up a Board of Agriculture. He was still not encouraged, and Arthur Young, the well-known agricultural writer, had a wager with him that he would not succeed. Nevertheless, he persisted and with the support of Henry Dundas (first Viscount Melville), secretary to the Home Office, on 15 May 1793 a motion was put to Parliament for an address to the Crown recommending such an institution, which was passed by 101 votes to twenty-six on 17 May.<sup>20</sup> The financing of the Board was however limited. Having originally wanted £10,500 Sinclair had to finally settle, after some negotiation, for a grant of £3,000 a year.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> R. Mitchison, 'The old Board of Agriculture (1793–1822)', *English Historical Review*, 74 (1959), p. 42.

<sup>19</sup> N. Goddard, 'Agricultural literature and societies' in Mingay, *Agrarian history of England and Wales*, p. 379.

<sup>20</sup> Dundas was a fellow Scot with whom Sinclair shared an interest in whist. They visited each other and were both friends and rivals in Scottish affairs. R. Mitchison, *Agricultural Sir John: The life of Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster 1754–1835* (London, 1962).

<sup>21</sup> Mitchison, 'The old Board of Agriculture', pp. 41–42; J. Sinclair, 'Preliminary observations on the origin of the Board of Agriculture and its progress for three years after its establishment' reprinted in *Communications to the Board of Agriculture on subjects relative to the husbandry and internal improvement of the country* (1797), vol. 1, pp. iii–xvi.

The original broad ambitions of the Board were laudable and threefold.<sup>22</sup> They were to give farmers the opportunity of acquiring as easily as possible information on best current practice, to excite a spirit of industry and experimentation in farmers, and to consider ways of making sufficient credit or capital available to farmers. Nevertheless, as will emerge from this discussion, Sinclair's ideas were not well thought through or realistically assessed, and the Board was finally wound up in 1822. In Sinclair's terms farmers were considered not as the great landowners, but rather the husbandmen or yeomen classes. The advantages of the Board were considered to be that it would become a reference source for agricultural knowledge and a means of promulgating it, that through foreign correspondence it would bring into the country the latest ideas from abroad and that, in general, it would become a stimulus for improvement.<sup>23</sup>

The Board was to consist of twenty-four unpaid, 'ordinary' members, who were almost entirely made up of the great and the good with little knowledge of agriculture, being mainly bishops, admirals, members of the nobility and politicians. Amongst this elite, who may have brought some science to the gathering, was Sir Joseph Banks FRS, the well-known botanist who had been with Cook to Australia and a few members with better agricultural credentials, including the Duke of Bedford and Thomas Coke. There were also to be 'honorary members', who, paradoxically, paid subscriptions and were elected by the ordinary members. This class of membership appears to have been fairly easy to obtain as there is no recorded instance of black-balling.<sup>24</sup>

However, Sinclair does not appear to have thought through in detail how the Board would operate. He originally set out to produce, as one of his first aims, a Statistical Account of England, parish by parish, similar to that which he was already bringing out for Scotland, but when this appeared impractical he fell back onto producing a series of county reports which would be united into a general report for the country as a whole.<sup>25</sup> The county surveys were planned to cover eighty counties of England, Scotland and

<sup>22</sup> *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, vol. 1, p. xvii.

<sup>23</sup> Substance of Sir John Sinclair's speech to Parliament, 15 May 1793, reprinted in *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, vol. 1, p. xxxiii.

<sup>24</sup> Mitchison, *Agricultural Sir John*, pp. 141–42.

<sup>25</sup> *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, vol. 1, p. xxxiii.

Wales.<sup>26</sup> Sinclair appears to have been totally unrealistic in budgeting for this undertaking, only allowing £500 for all the surveyor's expenses with a further £500 for printing and circulation. This can be compared with the much more generous allowance, relatively, of £300 for foreign correspondence and books. Yet he planned, initially, to make a free report available to every Member of Parliament (there were 375 at this time) and every Member of the Lords (126) who requested one. The final cost for the initial reports was £2,170, of which the largest part was printing. Because of this expense he subsequently required instead a subscription of 10 guineas from those who received the reports.<sup>27</sup>

Sinclair rapidly appointed all the authors, or surveyors as they were called, of the county reports before the Board was fully operative, so that they were appointed without the knowledge or approval of the Board, a point on which Arthur Young was later to complain. Sinclair seemed to have been in excessive haste to produce the national report. This led to unreasonable expectations of what could be achieved by the county surveyors. He claimed that surveyors, who were, in his opinion, preferably strangers to the districts they surveyed, could carry out a tour of a county in five or six weeks from which an adequate report could be produced and for which expenses only would be paid of £5-£10 per week. However, because the Board did not pay properly for the work, the choice of surveyors was restricted and they had little control over the methods used or the quality of the reports.<sup>28</sup> In fact, Sinclair was helped financially by a considerable number of the surveyors doing their reports for nothing, and the remainder were satisfied with amounts that scarcely covered their expenses.<sup>29</sup>

However, this approach throws considerable doubt on whether the best surveyors were appointed or whether the best job was done even in the limited time given. Plans of the agricultural surveys, in the form of questionnaires consisting of thirty-five questions, were issued to the county surveys in September 1793. Many of the reports were rapidly produced. Four were received before the end of 1793, and by July 1794 seventy-four of the authors had submitted their

<sup>26</sup> List of surveys in *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, vol. 1, pp. xlix-l.

<sup>27</sup> Sinclair, 'Plan for establishing a Board of Agriculture', pp. xviii, xiii.

<sup>28</sup> Mitchison, *Agricultural Sir John*, pp. 148-49.

<sup>29</sup> Sir John Sinclair's address to the Board of Agriculture 29 July 1794, in *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, vol. 1, p. liii.

contributions, but not surprisingly they were heavily criticised for superficiality, for lack of balance and ignorance of the surveyors.<sup>30</sup> This criticism reached its pinnacle with William Marshall's five volume *Review* of the reports which was published much later than the original county reports and itself is not without criticism or entirely unbiased. Marshall himself had proposed a review of existing farming methods in 1787 and a Board in 1790, but had not been successful, and he had been overlooked in favour of his bitter adversary Arthur Young when a secretary to the Board was appointed.<sup>31</sup> Marshall, in the introduction to volume 1 of his *Review*, points out how he proposed to the Society of Arts in February 1780 a 'plan for promoting agriculture', which appears to have been the forerunner to his 1787 proposal of a 'full and faithful register of the present practice of husbandry in well cultivated districts', and should have been based on twelve months residence in the immediate district by the surveyor. In 1790 he not only proposed a Board of Agriculture, but also ideas on the establishment of agricultural colleges. Sir John Sinclair anticipated the criticisms Marshall would publish later, and prefaced his preliminary observations on the origin of the Board of Agriculture with 'it may be sufficient to declare that I knew nothing of such a measure having been recommended by any other individual, previously to its having been proposed by myself'.<sup>32</sup>

Although the five volumes of Marshall's *Review* were published between thirteen and twenty-three years after the first Board of Agriculture county report, time had not diminished the hostility of his criticisms. Marshall criticised the plan of the original reports, 'if plan they can be said to have', as being 'without form and void'. The concept of basing the reports on the arbitrary division of counties he considered to be wrong, since natural districts were marked 'by a uniformity or similarity of soil and surface' and not county boundaries, and an agricultural district 'is discriminated by a uniformity or similarity of practice'.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> W. Marshall, *Review of the reports to the Board of Agriculture on the several counties of England*, vol. 1 (1808, reprint Newton Abbot), p. xxviii; Sir John Sinclair's address to the Board, July 1794, pp. liii, 49–53.

<sup>31</sup> Mitchison, 'The old Board of Agriculture', p. 41; P. Horn, *William Marshall (1745–1818) and the Georgian countryside* (Abingdon, 1982), p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Sinclair, 'Preliminary observations on the origin of the Board', p. iii.

<sup>33</sup> Marshall, *Review*, pp. xxviii, xxvi.

Marshall also stated his opinion of the necessary qualifications which the author of a county report should possess. Authors should not only have practiced agriculture in all its branches in different districts, but should also be well-versed in other aspects of estate management, including the letting of property, the control of tenants and the management of woodlands. An author should also have a good knowledge of the natural sciences, particularly as they apply to natural history, mathematics and an ability to write clearly. Finally, he considered that a surveyor with an intimate knowledge of the area on which he reported was necessary, preferably by residence in the area. Marshall conceded that 'a mere tourist' may observe certain facts about an area 'as far as they go', but these are dependent upon what is happening at the time of his visit and do not qualify him to make a general report.<sup>34</sup>

Whilst many of the points that Marshall makes have considerable validity, it is not difficult to make similar criticisms of his own *Review*. Marshall devoted eighty-three pages of his report to Lancashire, of which only the first three pages are entirely Marshall's contribution. The overwhelming majority of the remaining pages are direct quotes from Holt with the very occasional comment of Marshall's. Since Holt's *General view* amounted to 241 pages Marshall quoted approximately one third of Holt's work verbatim. Marshall's interjections are sometimes self-congratulatory and damning with faint praise such as 'the following remarks (by whom does not appear) on the *Operation of life leases*, correspond with what I have observed in the WEST of ENGLAND [his emphasis], I copy them, at length,—tautological and slovenly as they are!'<sup>35</sup>

Marshall's knowledge of Lancashire also appears to be based mainly on that group of individuals whom he particularly despised—the mere tourist. His knowledge was 'gained in crossing them [several parts of the county], in various directions; and halting, occasionally, to examine such passages as most attracted my notice'. These tours were in September 1792, July 1798, 1799, July 1800 and one undated tour, but pre-1792.<sup>36</sup>

How Holt came to be appointed as the surveyor for Lancashire is not clear. There were apparently other candidates, since Sir John

<sup>34</sup> Marshall, *Review*, pp. xxx–xxxiii.

<sup>35</sup> Marshall, *Review*, p. 275.

<sup>36</sup> Marshall, *Review*, pp. 242–43.

Sinclair in his introduction to Holt's report states that 'among other intelligent individuals nominated for that purpose Mr Holt of Walton near Liverpool was appointed to take a survey of the County of Lancaster'.<sup>37</sup> It would be interesting to know who the other possible candidates were. An obviously better candidate if a local man was to be selected would have been Thomas Eccleston of Scarisbrick. He was an estate owner and a practical improving farmer who was to become an honorary member of the Board, and who had already been awarded the gold medal of the Society for Arts, Manufactures and Commerce for his work on the draining of Martin Mere, a local wet land area and the largest fresh water lake in England.<sup>38</sup> Even Marshall recognised Eccleston as a gentleman entitled to 'honorable consideration' and 'an active promoter of rural improvements'.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, we have seen that Holt had no farming background. Marshall was critical of Holt, whose mode of survey he considers to be that of an 'inexperienced tourist' and whose qualifications to undertake the report he dismisses with sarcasm although he is sure that 'Mr Holt is evidently in earnest and desirous to promote the welfare of his country, as far as he is able; an amiable disposition which, I doubt not, induced him to comply with the solicitations of the Board'.<sup>40</sup>

Holt's appointment as the surveyor for Lancashire was public knowledge before 20 August 1793: a note was published bearing that date in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in which Holt also outlined his plans for a history of Liverpool, but which had to be suspended due to his appointment as the Lancashire surveyor for the Board of Agriculture report.<sup>41</sup> On 7 September 1793, a note was sent to Holt by Sinclair from Whitehall which requested Holt to set out on the agricultural survey of Lancashire as quickly as possible and to make enquiries relating to thirty-five specific questions which Sinclair attached to the note and which were the terms of reference for the surveys of all the counties referred to earlier.<sup>42</sup> This list of questions

<sup>37</sup> J. Sinclair in J. Holt, *General view of the agriculture of the county of Lancaster* (London, 1795), p. x.

<sup>38</sup> A. Turton, 'Thomas Eccleston 1754–1809: An eighteenth century agricultural improver' (MA thesis, Univ. of Liverpool, 1995).

<sup>39</sup> Marshall, *Review*, vol. 1, p. 248.

<sup>40</sup> Marshall, *Review*, vol. 1, pp. 246–47.

<sup>41</sup> *Gentleman's Magazine*, 63(2) (1793), pp. 908–10.

<sup>42</sup> Lancashire Record Office (Lancs RO), Scarisbrick Papers, DDSc 146/1 (box 4).

is reproduced as appendix 1. It is evident that full answers to these questions, if received from a representative group of well-informed people across the county, would provide an excellent basis for an edited review of the agriculture of the county.

Holt's *modus operandi* was to distribute copies of these questions to land owners in the county, and he started on this process fairly quickly, since a copy of the enquiries was left with Thomas Eccleston on 25 September: Eccleston's reply to this questionnaire is the only one that is known to survive.<sup>43</sup> Eccleston prepared detailed answers to thirty-four of the thirty-five questions. The only one which he did not answer was that asking for details of the most skilful improvers and most active farmers in the district, who might be of help to the Board. His responses are in general to the point and provide a fascinating glimpse of Scarisbrick in the late eighteenth century. Occasionally, one or two of his hobby horses, such as the iniquity of the Corn Laws and tithes, an obsession with sheep and a desire to introduce dog licenses become evident. Holt's method clearly had one important weakness in that it was dependent upon land owners to reply. If any major land owners did not do so, then there was an important gap in the information, unless Holt made up for this omission either by using information from his own independent knowledge, or used hearsay evidence from other land owners.

Holt carried out his work with alacrity and the first draft of the Lancashire *General view* was one of the first county reports issued in February 1794.<sup>44</sup> The original reports were issued as drafts and were printed in narrow columns on quarto paper with wide margins so that recipients could return them with additions or corrections appended in the margins, such modifications to be incorporated in the final report. Unfortunately, no copies of the original Lancashire *General view* have been located to date. Any appended comments would have been of particular interest to this assessment. In a foreword to the final publication of Holt's report, dated June 1795, Sir John Sinclair describes how the original county reports were circulated and a great mass of valuable information obtained as a consequence.<sup>45</sup> In order to make this information available to interested parties as soon as possible it was decided to reprint each county survey when it was deemed fit for publication. Several

<sup>43</sup> Lancs RO, DDSc 19/37.

<sup>44</sup> Marshall, *Review*, vol. 1, p. xxviii.

<sup>45</sup> J. Sinclair in Holt, *General view*, pp. i-iii, x.

reports were in a similarly advanced state, but it was though best to start the process by publishing a report for one eastern county and one from the western side of the country. The two counties chosen to be published in the first instance were Norfolk and Lancashire.

Despite Marshall's criticism that Holt did not acknowledge his sources, it is evident from reading the *General view* that Holt acknowledged many submissions and in a large number of cases quoted from whom the information came. From a detailed compilation of the names given in his book, it is therefore possible to identify the main respondents to the questionnaires sent by Holt, and by the omission of names identify some of those significant landowners who did not reply or made only cursory submissions. One criticism of Holt which can immediately be identified from a reading of his book with this approach in mind, is that much of his book was written by the method today described as 'cut and paste' over which Holt did not exercise sufficient editorial control, possibly because of a lack of his own detailed knowledge. One example is that when considering cheese, Holt cites Newburgh and Leigh cheeses as bearing a higher price at market, and then goes on to say

Dalton, belonging to Richard Wilbraham Bootle Esq., is unrivalled in Lancashire for cheese, and is undoubtedly the richest tract of land in the county; for besides being rich fox land, there are infinite beds of stone, flag, slate and coal. Timber thrives here uncommonly.<sup>46</sup>

This quotation can be described as little more than advertising by the landowner. Its use of superlatives is unhelpful because they refer to subjective issues which are not quantifiable, whilst Holt's inclusion of references to fox hunting, minerals and timber in a section on cheese is indicative of a lack of editorial control.

By the same token that Marshall criticises Holt for quoting large sections without acknowledgement or review, one may also criticise Marshall, who frequently quoted lengthy passages from Holt without comment, and even when criticism is made it is often merely derogatory and not constructive. An example, also relating to cheese making is

On cheese making all we find in this report is . . . contained in a letter to the surveyor on the subject of Leigh cheese, and in this only one passage

<sup>46</sup> Holt, *General view*, p. 146.

demands particular notice here. 'In Cheshire we must look for general information respecting the mysteries of the art'.<sup>47</sup>

A further, if relatively trivial, example of Holt's use of limited information is in regard to duck decoy ponds, an important way of catching wild ducks for food. Holt asserts that 'it is believed that the only decoy pond is at Orford, the seat of John Blackburne Esq., Member for the county'.<sup>48</sup> There was certainly another decoy pond on Thomas Eccleston's land on Martin Mere c. 1785, since it is clearly shown on a plan of the Mere, whilst a further pond at Hale, near Liverpool probably dates from that period.<sup>49</sup> What Holt in fact is saying is that John Blackburne MP was the only respondent who mentioned his decoy pond. Eccleston's detailed reply and Sinclair's list of questions do not suggest that such features were to be recorded in the reply, otherwise it seems that Eccleston would most likely have mentioned his own pond.

Although one of Marshall's criticisms of Holt is that he does not acknowledge his sources, a close examination of the *General view* shows that this criticism is unfounded. There is no index to either the 1795 publication or the 1968 re-publication to facilitate a search, but an examination of the book shows that fifty-two individuals are cited as sources of information, a number of them more than once. Thus a citation index identifying Holt's principal sources can be established (appendix 2). The leading authorities are Thomas Eccleston of Scarisbrick Hall, who is cited on fifteen occasions, and Henry Harper of Bank Hall, near Liverpool, who is cited sixteen times. The late John Harper, also previously of Bank Hall is also quoted. There are a few entries which are acknowledged anonymously, such as 'this communicated by an old and experienced farmer'.<sup>50</sup>

What is also of interest is the relative lack of information from some of the large estates. The only references to Lord Derby's estate are two items submitted by his steward, and two references to potatoes from his former and current gardeners. There is no reference to the Molyneux estates or the Blundell and Hesketh estates, all three being important estates in south west Lancashire,

<sup>47</sup> Marshall, *Review*, p. 320.

<sup>48</sup> Holt, *General view*, p. 146.

<sup>49</sup> Lancs RO, DDSc 151/20

<sup>50</sup> Holt, *General view*, p. 140.

whose absence is therefore significant. Further interesting light can also be thrown on Holt's sources by a consideration of where his informants came from. The place of residence of only five of the fifty-two individuals named by Holt cannot be identified, and the identified forty-seven people came from forty different places. There was a distinct cluster around Liverpool, the area in which Holt lived, and a far greater representation of informants from south of the Ribble compared with the northern part of the county.

This may be ascribed to a number of possible reasons. South west Lancashire, together with the Fylde, was the most important part of the county agriculturally, and would therefore be likely to have the highest number of more progressive farmers who would be willing to contribute to a survey of this type. It is also the area which Holt would have known best, and also the area in which he would have been best known. He would therefore be better informed about the important landowners in this area, and it is possible that because they knew him or knew of him they may have been more likely to respond. There is some evidence that he may have delivered his questionnaires personally, since Eccleston's draft reply is titled 'Answers to the enquiries of the Board of Agriculture left for me the 25th September by Mr Holt of Walton'.<sup>51</sup> This may be read to suggest that Holt called at Scarisbrick unexpectedly, only to find that Eccleston was not at home and therefore left the enquiries.

Alternatively, it is possible to suggest that much of Lancashire north of the Ribble consisted of less fertile land and with a greater proportion of upland, so that there was less variety in the agriculture, fewer important landowners and consequently a lower response rate. Indeed, Marshall in his *Review* divides Lancashire into two regions, the cultivated land and the moorland. This, however is an east-west division rather than a north-south one. Holt himself considered there to be five main areas of the county, the mountainous Furness area in the north, the fertile loamy soils of the Fylde, the mainly well-farmed lowlands of the west and south, the coal fields and the eastern moorlands.<sup>52</sup> The view that the greater response from south Lancashire was influenced by Holt's association with that part of the county seems the most likely explanation, and could be used in support of Sinclair's preference that surveyors

<sup>51</sup> Lancs RO, DDSc 19/37.

<sup>52</sup> Holt, *General view*, frontispiece map.

should be strangers to the districts on which they reported, since they would then have fewer biases. That reporters are influenced by their origins, even if subconsciously, is a reasonable reflection of human nature and was evident in two of the Lancashire submissions to the Royal Agricultural Society mid-nineteenth century essay competition and an earlier report on the rural economy of the county.<sup>53</sup> All these writers and Holt illustrate one of the problems of writing on the county as a whole, namely making generalisations on a diverse geographical area in which the practice of agriculture differed considerably from place to place, and support Marshall's assertion that the county was not the logical unit on which to base a discussion of agriculture.<sup>54</sup>

A further test of the usefulness of Holt's report is to examine the facts and opinions expressed in the *General view* in the light of later information. One of the first problems in using Holt is the lack of an index, there being only a general plan of the proposed outline for the reprinted reports, which were to be divided into seventeen chapters, with sub-headings, but lacking page numbers, so as a means of finding information it is of little help.<sup>55</sup> Indeed amongst Marshall's many criticisms is the lack of an index or table of contents to assist the reader in separating the 'wholesome grains from the chaff and weeds amongst which they have been ingeniously involved' and the whole 'hustled together in strange confusion'.<sup>56</sup> An example of this confusion, whereby a mass of unconnected information is juxtaposed is evident in the quotation already given above.

With a little knowledge it is easy to find fault with some of the detail given by Holt. Some examples of his lack of editorial influence have already been given. Examples of where his views are wrong or questionable include his comments on hemp and flax, the decline

<sup>53</sup> W. J. Garnett, *Report on the farming of Lancashire* (Preston, 1843); L. Rawsthorne, *Lancashire agriculture* (Penwortham, 1843); E. Lovat, *A sketch of the rural economy of the county of Lancaster* (Burnley, 1831). Garnett was from Bleasdale on the edge of the Bowland fells and considered that Lancashire agricultural was backward, but that the northern part of the county was better than the south. Rawsthorne compared Lancashire agriculture unfavourably with that of Scotland, ascribing the latter's superiority to its better education. He was from Penwortham, although one suspects he may have had Scottish connections. Lovat, from Burnley, makes no reference to south west Lancashire.

<sup>54</sup> Marshall, *Review*, vol. 1, pp. xxv-xxvii.

<sup>55</sup> Holt, *General view*, pp. iv-vi.

<sup>56</sup> Marshall, *Review*, vol. 1, p. 247.

of the yeomanry and tenants lack of capital. In discussing hemp and flax he states 'the culture, neither of hemp nor flax, was ever carried to any great extent in this county'. Apart from the grammar of this sentence and its difficult syntax leading to ambiguity, it would appear to mean that flax and hemp were never cultivated in Lancashire to any extent. This is not true. South west Lancashire up to and including the early eighteenth century was a flax-growing area in which linens were produced, and many farmer's inventories record the growing of flax, tools for the processing of raw flax, and spinning wheels.<sup>57</sup>

Holt also describes the great reduction in the yeomanry who had been tempted into trade by the great fortunes that were being made, and how 'almost all the farmers, who have raised fortunes by agriculture, place their children in the manufacturing line'.<sup>58</sup> These assertions are highly questionable. The use of the term yeoman is open to debate, but if one accepts that an individual's status is based on his own opinion of himself and what his peers consider himself to be, then there is evidence that there was no significant reduction in those who were considered yeomen. Nor were all Lancashire farmers making fortunes and abandoning farming. Indeed Holt was often inconsistent in his assertions. He introduced the section on estates, from which the above quotation is taken, by remarking that since the introduction of industry property had become more minutely divided. Yet with fewer farmers there should have been a move to larger farms otherwise the land would have reverted to waste. In fact, eighteenth century Lancashire was a county of small farms and this situation remained through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century.<sup>59</sup> Shortage of labour to work the farms is a separate issue, and Holt, probably rightly, recognised the growth of industry as creating competition for labour, the proximity to factories affecting farm wages, and labour shortage leading to the early introduction of farm mechanisation in Lancashire by the erection of threshing machines despite Lancashire not being an important corn-growing area.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> A. P. Wadsworth & J. de Lacy Mann, *The cotton trade and industrial Lancashire 1600-1780* (Manchester, 1965), p. 6; Virgoe, 'Rural south west Lancashire', pp. 194-95; F. Walker, *Historical geography of southwest Lancashire before the industrial revolution*, Chetham Society, new ser. 103 (1939), p. 61.

<sup>58</sup> Holt, *General view*, p. 13.

<sup>59</sup> Winstanley, 'Industrialization and the small farm', pp. 163-65.

<sup>60</sup> Holt, *General view*, pp. 208, 179-82, 34-35.

One of the main criticisms of Holt is that the *General view* lacks balance, which can be ascribed to his reliance on the approach he adopted of stringing together excerpts from the submissions he received from his contributors. Although Lancashire was not a major corn producing area, most farmers, except those with the very smallest farms, grew some corn even if only for feeding their own stock and for their own domestic consumption. Yet Holt, in section 4 of chapter VII on the crops commonly cultivated, had separate sections on potatoes, turnips (which he acknowledged were only grown on a small scale), clover, liquorice, rhubarb, chicory, madder, ruta бага and hemp and flax, whilst there was no specific section on any of the cereal crops, the information on which was scattered within the chapter.

Holt considered that the cultivation of the waste lands was 'undoubtedly the first object that ought to be attended to': in lowland Lancashire it was estimated that there were about 26,500 acres of moss or fenland.<sup>61</sup> He quotes extensively on the improvement of Chat Moss and Trafford Moss near Manchester, Rainford Moss near St Helens and Bootle Moss, but makes no mention of the far greater undertaking of the reclamation of Martin Mere, began by Thomas Fleetwood about 1696 and which had been worked on again in the 1780s by Thomas Eccleston, who had already been awarded the gold medal of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce for this work. Several accounts of Eccleston's work had been published, and although he had encountered problems which meant that he had not achieved the level of success he had hoped for, yet the accounts contained much information of use to a potential improver. This omission is surprising, particularly so since Eccleston was the most frequently quoted of all Holt's contributors. One is led to the conclusion that Holt did not include it because it had not been specifically drawn to his attention by Eccleston, who might reasonably have assumed that it would have been well known to Holt.

From a user's point of view, the main criticism of the *General view* is that the lack of an index or even a table of contents which gives page numbers makes it difficult to find information on a particular topic. This problem would have been equally valid for a late

<sup>61</sup> Holt, *General view*, pp. 233, 86. Holt quotes an estimate made by Yates, who surveyed the county in 1786.

eighteenth farmer wishing to use the book as a reference source as it to a modern historical researcher. Furthermore, it is compounded by Holt's poor writing style and his tendency to scatter information about within the volume in various places. This is particularly apparent by contrast with some of the other volumes in the series, and lends weight to Marshall's criticisms.<sup>62</sup> One can argue with much of the detail, on the basis of information from other sources, but Holt also contains a considerable body of useful information. On some of the wider issues, he shows considerable intuition, in particular his early recognition of the importance of industrialisation and that it could have both good and bad effects. The good effects included a rise in population which led to an increase in the wealth of the county, whilst the bad effects included water pollution and dangers to the health of workers in industry. He clearly recognised the impact of industry upon agriculture, and the desirability of it being investigated. Holt also recognised that farmers are not stupid, as they were made out to be, and that because of the vicissitudes of the weather and the small size of most Lancashire farms they had little room for experimentation.<sup>63</sup>

The main sources available to Holt were the gentry, and to a lesser degree, their main tenants the yeomen farmers. It was estimated that at the time of the Civil Wars there were 774 gentry families in Lancashire. Although the term 'gentry' is usually linked with 'landed' they were both rural and urban. Approximately 60% were located south of the Ribble. Estate papers deposited in the Lancashire Record Office show a roughly even split between those from north and those from south of the Ribble. These figures give only a very rough approximation of the potential informants to Holt, and it is self-evident that he could not consult them all, but they are very different to the distribution of Holt's sources which show a six to one preference to those from south of the Ribble. Holt's account can therefore hardly be considered to be a balanced one, but in his defence the very short time and limited budget made available needs to be taken into account. The blame for this should be ascribed to the highly unrealistic ideas of Sir John Sinclair.

Surprisingly, very little has been written about the value of the reports. The most balanced review remains that of Lord Ernle, who

<sup>62</sup> For example, J. Webster, *General view of the agriculture of Galloway* (Edinburgh, 1794); S. Smith, *General view of the agriculture of Galloway* (London, 1810).

<sup>63</sup> Holt, *General view*, pp. 209–11, 19–20.

considered that despite all their faults they collected a mass of valuable information on the state of farming between 1793 and 1813 although he noted that the commissioners were not always selected wisely, without naming specific cases.<sup>64</sup> The reports were written to provide an account of contemporary farming in the counties and to identify obstacles to improvement and the way they could be overcome. They have subsequently been widely used by agricultural historians. It is difficult to assess what use Holt's book was to the typical late eighteenth or early nineteenth century Lancashire farmer. The majority of Lancashire farms were small, and although the county had a relatively high standard of literacy it is doubtful that many small farmers had the inclination, time or money to use such a volume even if they knew of its existence. The influence of the landlord was probably the most important factor, and there is good evidence of a fairly high degree of interest in agricultural improvement through the existence of agricultural societies in the county and the level of membership. The Manchester Society was formed in 1767, one of the earliest in the country, and through amalgamations it still continues today as the Royal Lancashire Agricultural Society. In 1799 it had 120 paying members and a number of honorary members, the latter being mainly the great and the good of the agricultural world from outside the county. It must be some measure of the esteem with which John Holt was held locally that he was an honorary member. A second agricultural society was formed for the Hundred of West Derby in 1802. In 1803 it had already 115 subscribing members. It is likely that the members of these societies knew of and had opinions about Holt's work, so that he may be considered to have had some influence, at least in the south of the county.

The value of the reports to the historian is self-evident in the degree to which almost any work on the late eighteenth refers to them, and they have been considered amongst the most important of contemporary descriptions.<sup>65</sup> However, as this paper shows, their content needs to be considered with caution, and to consider them to be 'of vital importance to the student of this period in history'

<sup>64</sup> Ernle, *English farming past and present*, pp. 196–97.

<sup>65</sup> D. B. Grigg, 'The changing agricultural geography of England: A commentary on the sources available for the reconstruction of the agricultural geography of England, 1770–1850', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 41 (1967), p. 77.

probably overstates the case.<sup>66</sup> Holt's book is not well-written or easy to use, and it is possible to find a number of examples, other than those quoted here, where the assertions made by Holt are open to question. Nevertheless, it contains a considerable amount of interesting detail, which gives a contemporary view of late eighteenth century agriculture in Lancashire, and if treated with a critical eye and an awareness of the limited nature of the sources that Holt drew upon and his personal limitations in practical farming knowledge it provides the historian with an important source. No doubt it will continue to be used as such in the future. *The general view of the agriculture of the county of Lancaster* therefore seems to be a typical example of these reports produced by the Board of Agriculture which, despite the caveats discussed here, 'may be considered to be of more use to agricultural historians than they were to contemporaries'.<sup>67</sup>

## APPENDIX 1

Sir,

You are requested to set out as quickly as possible on the Agricultural Survey of Lancashire and to make the following Inquiries.

I am Sir

Your Obedient Servant

John Sinclair

Whitehall Sept. 7th 1793

To Mr John Holt, Walton, near Liverpool

## Agricultural Surveys

The Inquiries principally to be made will relate to the following points:

- I. The nature of the soil and climate of the district to be examined?
- II. The manner in which the land is possessed, whether by great or by small proprietors?
- III. The manner in which the land is occupied, whether great or by small farmers?

<sup>66</sup> J. Addy, *The agrarian revolution* (London, 1972), p. 24.

<sup>67</sup> Goddard in Mingay, *Agrarian history of England and Wales*, p. 381.

- IV. The manner in which the land is employed, whether in pasture, in husbandry, or, a mixture of both?
- V. If in pasture, what grasses are cultivated? What species of stock is kept? Whether the breeds can be improved, or whether new breeds ought to be tried?
- VI. Whether any of the land is watered and whether any considerable extent of ground is capable of that improvement?
- VII. If the land is employed in husbandry what are the grains principally cultivated.
- VIII. What is the rotation of crops? and in particular whether green crops, as turnips, clover, &c are cultivated and how they are found to answer?
- IX. Whether fallowing is practised, or otherwise?
- X. What manures are made use of?
- XI. What are the useful sorts of ploughs, carts and other implements of husbandry?
- XII. Whether oxen or horses are made use of?
- XIII. What is the usual seed time and harvest?
- XIV. Whether the land is in inclosed or open fields?
- XV. What advantages have been found to result from inclosing land, in regard to the increase of rent—quantity, or quality of produce—improvements of stock &c.
- XVI. What is the size and nature of the inclosures?
- XVII. Whether inclosures have increased or decreased population?
- XVIII. Whether there are common fields, and whether any division of them is proposed?
- XIX. What is the difference of rents or produce between common fields and inclosed lands?
- XX. What is the extent of wastelands, and the improvement of which they are most capable, whether by being planted, converted into arable or into pasture land?
- XXI. What is the rate of wages, and price of labour, and what are the hours at which labour commences and ceases at the different seasons?
- XXII. Whether proper attention is paid to the drainage of land, particularly the fenny part of it, and what sorts of drains are commonly made use of?
- XXIII. Whether paring or burning is practiced, and how is it managed and found to answer?

- XXIV. Whether the country is well wooded, and whether the woodlands are kept under a proper system?
- XXV. What is the price of provisions, and whether the price is likely to be steady, to rise, or to fall?
- XXVI. What is the state of the roads, both public and parochial, whether they are in good order or capable of improvement?
- XXVII. What is the state of farm houses and offices, whether in general they are well situated and properly constructed?
- XXVIII. What is the nature of the leases commonly granted, and the covenants usual between landlord and tenant?
- XXIX. To what extent have commerce or manufactures been carried on in the district, and have they had either good or bad effects on its agriculture?
- XXX. Are there any practices in the district that could be of service in other places?
- XXXI. Are there any societies instituted in the district for the improvement of agriculture?
- XXXII. Whether the people seem to have a turn for improvements, or how such a spirit could best be excited?
- XXXIII. What improvements can be suggested either in regard to the stock or the husbandry of the district?
- XXXIV. Are there any obstacles to improvements and in what manner can they best be removed?
- XXXV. What are the names, descriptions, and address of those proprietors, or farmers, who are the most active, or the most skilful improvers in the district, and who are the most likely to be useful correspondents to the board of agriculture?

## APPENDIX 2

## Citation index of John Holt's informants

Name	Place	No. of citations
Anon., 'an experienced farmer'		1
Anon.	Leigh	1
Ashcroft, Edward	Walton	1
Atherton, J	Walton	2
Atherton, Major		1
Baloner, J	Toxteth Park	1

Name	Place	No. of citations
Bayley, Mr	Hope	4
Blundell, Henry	Ince Hall	1
Blundell, J	Ormskirk	1
Bootle, R W	Lathom	1
Boyer, Mr	Lathom House	1
Butler, Alexander	Kirkland	1
Butler, Mr, Earl of Derby's gardener	Knowlsey	1
Chorley, John	Prescot	1
Clayton, George	Lostock, nr Preston	1
Collins, Mr, Earl of Derby's former gardener	Knowlsey	1
Cooke, George	Ashton nr Preston	1
Cooper, Mr	Late of Manchester	1
Daulby, D	Birch House, Liverpool	2
Dicas, Mr, instrument maker	Liverpool	1
Eccleston, Thomas	Scarisbrick	15
Fazakerley, S. H.	Fazakerley	2
Fitzherbert Brockholes, Wm	Claughton	1
Formby, Rev.	Formby	1
Gamekeeper to R. W. Bootle	Lathom	1
Green, George	Aughton	2
Harper, Henry	Bank Hall, Liverpool	16
Harper, John	Bank Hall, Liverpool	2
Hoghton, Sir Harry		1
Jenkinson, John	Yealand	2
Johnson, Rev. Croxton	Wilmslow	1
Johnson, Thomas, manufacturer	Tyldersley	2
Jones, Mr	Billinge	1
Jones, Richard	Little Hulton, Bolton	1
Leigh Phillips	Manchester	3
Mayo, Mr (tenant to T. B. Bayley)	Hope	1
Mayor, William (?)	Ashworth Hall, nr Rochdale	1
Moorcroft, Mr		1
Mordaunt, Col.	Halsall	1
Naylor, John	Ashton, St Helens	1
Okill, James	Lee Woolton	1
Ormerod, Dr	Rochdale	1
Roscoe, Mr	Liverpool	1
Stainbank, Rev. J.	Halton Hall	1
Stevens, Mr	Chorley	1
Sumner, Oscar	Wigan	1

Name	Place	No. of citations
Sykes, J	Gateacre	1
Taylor, Mr		2
Wakefield, Thomas	Brook farm, 2.5 miles SE of Liverpool	4
Waring, Mr, Steward to Earl of Derby	Knowsley	2
Whiteside, Mr	Lancaster	1
Wilkinson, Mr	Castle Head	3
Wright, Thomas, gardener to John Fazackerkey	Prescot	1
Yates, William		2