

*THE AGRICULTURAL HISTORY OF CHESHIRE,
1750—1850*

BY C. STELLA DAVIES
(Chetham Society, Manchester, 1960)

DR. DAVIES is an experienced extra-mural tutor who has specialised in courses on modern economic and Cheshire history. In this work, based upon her Ph. D. thesis, she deals with a period which saw many changes in the conditions and practice of British agriculture. Not only did the farmers have to feed as far as possible a rapidly increasing population, but they were required to make their contribution to the national effort during the long and exhausting Napoleonic wars. As a result new techniques were adopted, enclosure proceeded apace, and the agrarian economy was transformed. The period of stimulus and prosperity was followed by the postwar depression during which many farmers were ruined and many farms abandoned. Cheshire was well placed to exploit the markets provided by the developing manufacturing regions and growing populations within or near its borders. How the farmers of the county adapted themselves to the changing conditions of the century she has chosen is the main theme of Dr. Davies's book.

She begins with an introductory study of the geographical and historical backgrounds, after which there are chapters on the following topics—Land Tenure and the Conditions of Tenancy, The Enclosure of Land, The Farming Community and Agrarian Economy. Much of the material is based on original research and is drawn from a wide variety of documents. Good use has been made of contemporary reports on Cheshire agriculture and there are careful studies of the enclosure acts and awards for selected parishes.

The introductory survey is the least satisfactory part of the book. The treatment of the geographical conditions needs expanding. More with advantage might have been said about the soil basis of agriculture in Cheshire since quite a lot of information has been made available during recent years. From this it appears that the part played by soil characteristics is quite as important as climatic factors in deciding land use and crop growth. In the rest of the introduction the author deals in outline with the historical background and considers such topics as

settlement patterns in Anglo-Saxon times, the extent of the open-field system and the assartment of the forest and the enclosure of the waste. There are some inaccuracies. For example, are Ince and Crewe the only two Celtic names in Cheshire? Are they Danish names on Wirral or Irish Norse?

The next chapter on land tenure and conditions of tenancy is full of detail. The author has carried out a careful investigation of the Land Tax Returns and makes available a large amount of new material. There are studies of the Tollemache, Crewe, Dorfold and Derby estates, and a survey of land tenure in Cheshire based mainly on sample villages in the hundreds of Broxton, Eddisbury and Macclesfield.

Dr. Davies is at her best when dealing with enclosure and the farming community. She discusses open-field agriculture and believes that although it existed quite widely its importance should not be exaggerated. Its enclosure took place by adjustment and agreement and it had a considerable influence on the organisation and layout of farms until the middle of the nineteenth century. After 1800 parliamentary enclosure was mainly concerned with the common and waste. Most of the awards were for less than 100 acres. Some are considered in detail including the Delamere award which was unusually large and involved more than 8,000 acres. About half of this was retained by the crown to provide timber and wood for the navy, the remainder being divided among those who had claims on the forest. In Cheshire it seems that enclosure proceeded gradually and peacefully and with the consent of all sections of the community. The area of cultivated land was extended and new farms were created but without upsetting drastically the social equilibrium of the villages. There are only two examples of organised opposition to the enclosure of land in Cheshire and they were not important. The first occurred at Beacon near Romiley in the middle of the eighteenth century, and the other at Nantwich in 1801 where the dispute dragged on until 1870.

In the chapter on "The Farming Community" there is a wealth of information and statistics about working conditions and living standards among the farmers and their labourers. It appears that the average number of acres per farming family was quite low except on Wirral and around Macclesfield. About half the farms employed no labour at all and were run by the farmers and their families: many of the others employed no more than two labourers each. There were eleven large farms of over 500 acres where the number employed varied between two and eleven. Dr. Davies also discusses the various forms of income received by the farm workers and illustrates by refer-

ence to particular farms and estates. She then deals with the small farmers and suggests that an indication of their low living standards can be seen from the quality of the farm houses and buildings which were erected on the common land enclosed during this period. Larger holdings were better planned and in demand: the accounts of several are quoted. After 1800 agricultural shows were encouraged, and contributed, through the dissemination of ideas, to the improvement of agriculture in the county. Agricultural co-operation was poorly developed although there were other forms of co-operation. The Alderley Society, founded in 1752, was an interesting example of self-help and mutual aid which eventually included all sections of the village community.

With regard to farm economy Cheshire was primarily a dairying region and was not much affected by "New Husbandry". Such changes as occurred consisted of small and gradual improvements. Dr. Davies describes the work of draining, marling, liming and boning which did so much to improve the soil and pastures by the middle of the nineteenth century. Oats and barley were the most important crops: very little wheat was grown probably because of the unsuitable climatic conditions. But the main interest was in dairy farming and there are details about the dairy herds, their number and composition and the techniques of herd management. There is also a shorter treatment of the place of horses, pigs and sheep in the agrarian economy.

The last third of the book consists of extensive and valuable extracts from manuscripts, surveys, rentals and enclosure awards. In addition there is a useful bibliography and three maps including a tithe map of Snelson.

Altogether Dr. Davies has produced a conscientious piece of research in which most of the accessible documentary sources have been consulted. It is perhaps almost overburdened factually and there is a need for more interpretation. Nevertheless it remains a valuable compilation which should be of great interest to economic and local historians and to future workers in this particular field.

B. M. C. HUSAIN.

