
*The Myth of the Old Poor Law and
the Making of the New*

NO MATTER which authority we consult on the English Poor Laws in the nineteenth century the same conclusions emerge: the Old Poor Law demoralized the working class, promoted population growth, lowered wages, reduced rents, destroyed yeomanry, and compounded the burden on ratepayers; the more the Old Poor Law relieved poverty, the more it encouraged the poverty which it relieved; the problem of devising an efficient public relief system was finally solved with the passage of the "harsh but salutary" Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. So unanimous are both the indictment and the verdict of historians on this question that we may forego the pleasure of citing "chapter and verse."

The bare facts are familiar enough. Until late in the eighteenth century, public relief was largely confined to those too young, too old, or too sick to work. But, in 1782, Gilbert's Act sanctioned the principle of relieving the so-called "able-bodied" without requiring them to enter the workhouse. Then, in 1795, the magistrates of Speenhamland in the county of Berkshire, responding to the exceptional rise in the price of wheat, decided to fix a "minimum standard" by supplementing earned incomes in proportion to the price of wheaten bread and the size of workers' families. The idea was soon imitated in adjoining counties, and in the following year it was ratified by Parliament. The practice of making allowances-in-aid-of-wages was almost always associated with make-work schemes which rotated the unemployed among local farmers in accordance with the rated value of their property. By divorcing earnings from the productivity of labor, the Allowance System in conjunction with the Roundsman System sapped the initia-

tive of agricultural workers and thus contributed to the unprecedented rise in poor relief expenditures in the years before and after Waterloo. So ran the argument of the reformers of 1834 and so runs the consensus of modern opinion.

History repeats itself, says an ancient proverb—and historians repeat each other. The standard analysis of the effects of the Old Poor Law is derived, without qualification, from the *Poor Law Commissioners' Report of 1834*, that "brilliant, influential, and wildly unhistorical document," as Tawney once described it. But it was a gross exaggeration that led the reformers of 1834 to characterize the Old Poor Law as "a bounty on indolence and vice" and "a universal system of pauperism." Only an incomplete theoretical analysis of the workings of the Speenhamland policy and a superficial examination of the facts could have produced so one-sided an interpretation. The continued endorsement of the *Report of 1834* has seriously distorted the history of the Industrial Revolution in Britain. The Old Poor Law tried to maintain the real income of workers by tying wages to the cost of living; it provided unemployment compensation together with a scheme to promote private employment; and it coupled both of these to a family endowment plan. It is not often realized that the kind of arguments which are used to condemn the Old Poor Law *per se* would equally condemn most modern welfare legislation. Perhaps this is the intention, but even "left-wing" historians, such as the Webbs and the Hammonds, have attacked the Old Poor Law on the one hand, and, on the other, have argued that minimum wage legislation accompanied by children allowance payments would have been a preferable alternative to Speenhamland. But, in fact, their proposal amounts to nearly the same thing as the Old Poor Law.

The years between 1813 and the accession of Victoria have been aptly described as "the blackest period of English farming." When we put together everything we know about the causes of "agricultural distress" in those years, we will have grounds more relative than maladministration of the Poor Laws to account for the growth of relief expenditures. This is not merely an academic question. In the Victorian era, the whole of what we would nowadays call "social services" were reflected in poor-law expenditures. And the *Report of 1834*, with its strictures on "the old system," was revered for three generations as a canonical book, teaching that all forms of dole, charity, and relief to the unemployed are suspect, because they only induce him to breed in idleness; that least relief is best relief; and that voluntary charity is

always preferable to public aid because it is somehow capable of discriminating the "deserving" poor from the "undeserving." Without the continued influence of "the principles of 1834," Mrs. Jellyby is unthinkable.

I

Before looking at the empirical evidence, let us consider what results might be expected from a system of subsidizing wages, considered by itself. Most historians assume without question that the Allowance System must have depressed agricultural earnings: farmers could pay less than competitive rates because the parish officers were forced to make up the deficit. But what if the guaranteed subsidy made workers less willing to supply effort? It is elementary economics that the short-run effect of a subsidy to workers is to lessen the supply—the number of days per week offered by men, women, and children; if the supply curve of labor is positively sloped, the result is that wages will *rise*. Of course, if the subsidy is tied to the size of the family, it may promote earlier marriages and more children, so that, within a decade or so, it does depress wages. To a generation drunk on Malthusian wine, the population argument seemed irrefutable. But nowadays we are inclined to treat this type of reasoning with more skepticism, particularly if the subsidy is modest in amount, increases less than proportionately with each additional child, and is continuously scaled down year after year; as we shall see, all three things were true under the Old Poor Law.¹

It is possible to argue, however, that the Allowance System depressed wages even if it did not stimulate the growth of population. A subsidy that varies inversely with earned wages, and that is what the Allowance System amounted to, gives workers no incentive to supply genuine effort. And since employers are not the only taxpayers, the system like-

¹ Alfred Marshall, testifying in 1893 before the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor, deplored the persistence of Malthusian thinking among laymen and illustrated the evolution of professional economic opinion in the nineteenth century in these words: "Suppose you could conceive a Mad Emperor of China to give to every English working man half-a-crown for nothing: according to the current notions, as far as I have been able to ascertain them, that would lower wages, because it would enable people to work for less. I think that nine economists out of ten at the beginning of the century would have said that that would lower wages. Well, of course, it might increase population and that might bring down wages; but unless it did increase population, the effect according to the modern school would be to raise wages because the increased wealth of the working classes would lead to better living, more vigorous and better educated people with greater earning power, and so wages would rise. That is the centre of the difference." *Official Papers* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1926), p. 249.

wise deprives those who hire labor of the incentive to exact a full day's work. In consequence, productivity declines, output shrinks, and wages fall. This kind of reasoning, which for present purposes we might label Benthamite rather than Malthusian, was very common in the days before 1834. It has a distinctly modern ring: to divorce wages from their roots in the efficiency of labor must lead to a misallocation of resources.

Applied to an underdeveloped country, however, this argument must be severely qualified. The early stages of economic development are invariably characterized by "dualism": the high-wage industrial sector is largely independent of the low-wage agricultural sector. In contrast to manufacture, labor in agriculture is typically hired on a day-to-day basis and the demand for farm workers varies sharply from season to season. Full employment may be achieved during planting and harvesting, but during slack seasons, which comprise from one third to one half of the calendar year, as much as half the labor force may be idle. The gradual destruction of handicraft industry due to the invasion of machine-made goods sometimes creates a pool of chronically unemployed labor even during peak seasons. The automatic market forces which would eliminate such unemployment by driving down wage rates fail to operate if wages are below the biological minimum, implying that the food intake of workers is not sufficient to permit them to supply their maximum effort per unit of time. The amount of work put forth now depends on the wages paid, rather than the other way around: lower wages would lower the consumption and hence the productivity of workers. Under these circumstances, it will pay landlords and farmers to maintain wages above competitive market-clearing levels and to devise a special scheme to eliminate open unemployment. The standard method is to disguise the manpower surplus by sharing the work out among all job-seekers with each man putting forth less effort than he is capable of supplying. Since labor costs per unit of output are now lower than they would be if the unemployed were permitted to underbid going wage rates, such institutional arrangements lead to a greater total product than would otherwise be available.²

With 40 per cent of the gainfully occupied population in agriculture, England in 1815 must be counted among the underdeveloped countries,

² For theoretical analysis of the phenomenon of disguised unemployment, see H. Leibenstein, "The Theory of Underemployment in Backward Economies," *Journal of Political Economy*, LXV (April 1957); and P. Wonnacott, "Disguised and Overt Unemployment in Underdeveloped Economies," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, LXXVI (May 1962).

displaying all the familiar features of a "dual" economy. Under the circumstances, a system of supplementing the earnings of agricultural workers so as to guarantee a "living wage" must have pulled in opposite directions. On the one hand, it reduced mortalities, particularly infant mortalities, and so depressed wages by promoting population growth. It may also have slowed down emigration to the industrial sector with similar effects. On the other hand, insofar as it repaired nutritional deficiencies, it tended to raise wages by raising the effort level of each worker. The family endowment features of the Speenhamland policy pulled in one direction while the use of the bread scale to determine the amount of the wage subsidy pulled in the other.

The problem of deciding which of the two forces predominated is complicated by the fact that wheat was both the principal wage good and, in some sections of the country, the principal product of farmers demanding labor. In years of drought, when the demand for agricultural labor fell off, tending to lower wages, the price of bread soared upwards and the subsidy increased. Conversely, in years of bumper crops, wages tended to rise and the subsidy would fall as the price of bread declined. One of the significant side effects of the Allowance System, as Malthus pointed out, was to render the demand for wheat insensitive to wheat prices by stabilizing the real income of agricultural workers who, if we are to believe Eden's budget studies, spent almost half of their income on wheaten bread. Thus, when wheat prices rose after a bad harvest, the total quantity of wheat sold declined less than proportionately and farmers enjoyed higher incomes than they had expected. On the other hand, a good harvest would lead to a decline both in the price of wheat and in the total receipts of farmers. So universal was this inverse association of the yield of the harvest and agricultural prosperity in this period that we may take it as a fact that the demand for wheat was then highly inelastic.

Since the poor rates were levied on the occupiers, not on the owners, of land and real estate, farmers themselves paid a major share of the rates used to finance wage subsidies. Owing to the inelastic demand for wheat, it was paradoxically true that they gained on the swings what they lost on the roundabout. Spending on relief rose when the harvest was poor, but at such times the income of farmers was at a maximum. Conversely, when they were squeezed by falling prices and rising wages in consequence of a good harvest, the pressure on the rates was at a minimum. In other words, poor relief spending fluctuated with the income of farmers. No wonder we hear more complaints about "the

onerous burdens of the poor rates" in years when inclement weather produced "agricultural prosperity"!

We must, however, take into account the possibility of a trend created by an excess of bad years over good. By putting a floor under the demand for wheat, the Old Poor Law kept up the price of bread in years of drought. In this way, a persistently unfavorable trend in rainfall or temperature could account for rising relief expenditures, irrespective of the effects of relief spending on population growth and work incentives.

To round out the analysis, we recall that allowances-in-aid-of-wages were almost always associated with the Roundsman System, modified by the use of the Labor Rate. The Poor Law authorities calculated the total wage bill of the parish and then levied the poor rate to cover this amount. Each ratepayer agreed to pay the allotted sum either in wages or in rates. By accepting his quota of the unemployed in proportion to the assessed value of his property, a farmer could be relieved of paying part of his rates. It was thought that this would encourage employment because farmers would prefer to employ more workers than they really needed rather than to pay the parish the deficiency in their allotted rates. In view of the existence of visible as well as invisible unemployment in rural districts at that time, the idea of the Labor Rate made good sense: as long as labor is in surplus, wasteful employment may well be cheaper than maintaining workers on the dole. But since employers of labor were not the only ratepayers, the system tended to discriminate against family farms and smallholders who employed little labor. We cannot say how much importance attaches to such considerations unless we know just how the rates were determined, how many workers in a parish were typically unemployed, and how far market wages stood below an acceptable minimum standard. It is time to turn to the evidence.

II

The first question is: How prevalent was the system of subsidizing wages out of the rates? To answer this question at all we must perforce oversimplify. Poor Law administration before 1834 differed widely in aims and methods from place to place and from time to time. Parliamentary legislation failed to produce a national Poor Law, and throughout this period there was only a casual connection between the statute books and the administrative practices of parish officers. The 15,000 parishes in England and Wales varied in area from thirty acres to

thirty square miles, in population from a few dozen to tens of thousands, and in taxable capacity from a barren common to the built-up docks of the City of London. With a system so heterogeneous, any generalization is bound to be subject to serious qualification.

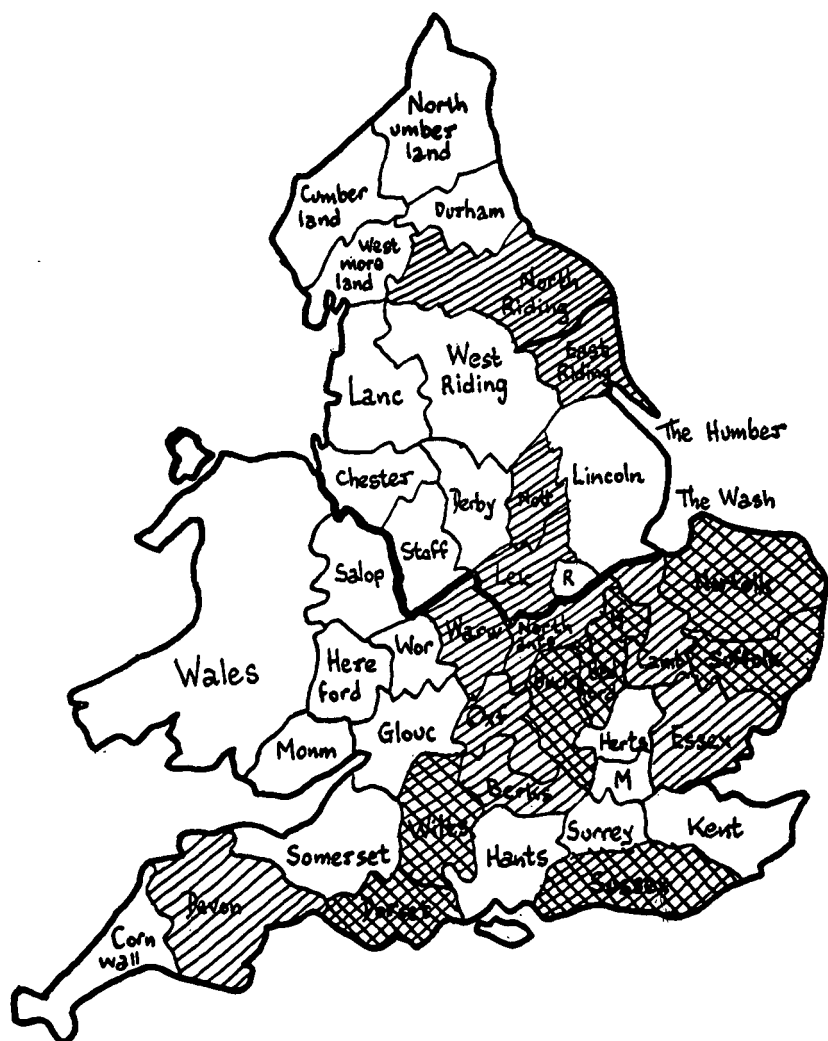
Moreover, we know next to nothing about the actual number of people relieved or about the proportions relieved inside and outside workhouses before 1834. Throughout this period, only two attempts were made to take a census of the poor. The first, in 1802, was the more thorough, showing about one million people on relief, including 300,000 children under the ages of fifteen.³ This implies that as much as 11 per cent of the population of England and Wales was then on relief, but, unfortunately, we know that the census counted more than once any "pauper" who applied for relief at two or three separate occasions in the year, a common practice at the time. Of the total number receiving aid, only 8 per cent were residents of workhouses. This is not surprising, considering that there were only 400 workhouses in the whole of the country. Even where there was a workhouse in the parish, magistrates were frequently reluctant to "offer the House" which was invariably an unsanitary and disorderly institution, herding together the young, the old, the sick, and the insane. The heavy reliance on outdoor relief, therefore, was as much due to a humane concern over the plight of the poor as to anything else. Even those reported to be "disabled by permanent illness" were not always forced into the workhouse, as evidenced by the fact that their number in 1802 exceeded the number of workhouse residents. With more than 90 per cent of the pauper host receiving outdoor relief, about 55 per cent were said to be on "permanent" relief, while 35 per cent were denoted as being relieved "occasionally." This does not tell us, however, how many were entirely dependent upon parish funds and how many had their wages supplemented "permanently" or "occasionally" by the Poor Law authorities. The next census, for 1812-1814, was equally vague and, furthermore, it failed to count either children under fifteen on outdoor relief or non-residents of the parish.⁴

The prevailing belief at the time was that the Allowance System was confined to the agricultural counties of the South. The *Report of 1834* made no effort to verify this assumption. The Commissioner circulated questions in the rural districts, but not all parishes were visited, and it

³ P. P. 1803-1804 (175), XIII. The returns of the census are also found in J. Marshall, *A Digest of All the Accounts* (1833), pp. 33, 38.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

is impossible to tell whether the replies constitute anything like a representative sample. The Commissioners never attempted to sum-



In the shaded counties, most parishes subsidized wages out of the poor rates in 1824. The system was particularly prevalent in the heavily shaded counties. The heavy line bisecting England separates the high-wage counties of the North from the low-wage counties of the South.

marize their findings, and in the *Report* itself they offered a few graphic examples of the Allowance System drawn from parishes in both the South and the North, thus conveying the impression that what they admittedly called "the abuses of the South" were to be found throughout the country. Even the Webbs, in their definitive book on *The Old Poor Law*, say no more than that outdoor relief to the unemployed was "adopted, in principle, at one time or another by practically every rural parish outside Northumberland," and was universal in rural districts south of the line that runs from the Severn to the Wash.⁵

The only worthwhile evidence we have is a neglected questionnaire circulated to the Poor Law authorities in 1824 by the *Select Committee on Labourers' Wages*, to which Clapham first drew attention in 1926.⁶ Unfortunately, in the slapdash manner of the day, the Committee failed to indicate what proportion of the parishes responded to the questionnaire. The replies from the various counties were grouped in terms of "hundreds" or wapentakes, and since these differed widely in population, it is difficult to weigh the answers in order to arrive at an accurate picture of the spread of the Allowance System. The Committee itself concluded that the Speenhamland policy was pervasive in eight southern counties, but an examination of the returns shows that it was also fairly widespread in twelve others. The complex situation is conveniently summed up in the accompanying map.

Clapham provides a fair summary of the findings, which contain a few surprises worth noting. All the northern counties, with the exception of Yorkshire, categorically denied supplementing wages from the rates. But so did all the counties in Wales and in the Southwest, with the exception of some districts in Devon. Furthermore, even in the South and Southeast, most of the parishes in Hampshire, Kent, and Surrey, at least half of the parishes in Essex, Suffolk and Sussex, and the whole of Hertfordshire and Middlesex (including London) denied practicing the Speenhamland policy. The spread of the system as far north as Nottinghamshire, however, and its adoption in the East and North Riding, is somewhat unexpected.

The Committee not only inquired whether wages were paid out of

⁵ S. and B. Webb, *English Poor Law History: Part I: The Old Poor Law* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1927), pp. 181, 185, 188-89, 400-1.

⁶ J. Clapham, *The Economic History of Modern Britain. The Railway Age* (2d ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1939), pp. 123-25. The Webbs dismissed this piece of evidence in a footnote in *English Poor Law History: Part II: The Last Hundred Years* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1929), I, 61n.

rates but also whether the Roundsman System was in use and whether allowances for extra children were customary. The Roundsman System in the form of a Labor Rate was found everywhere associated with the Allowance System and never resorted to without it. It appears, however, that it was not common practice to make an extra allowance for the first child, even in counties where wages were regularly subsidized out of the rates. At the same time, all parishes admitted giving allowances to large families as a matter of course. From the answers pertaining to the grant of outdoor relief, it seems that every parish followed its own rules: some parishes gave relief in money while others confined assistance to payments in kind; some distinguished between insufficient income due to unemployment and low-standard wage rates, but most did not; in some districts, no inquiry into earnings was made before granting outdoor relief; in others, only wages received during the last few weeks were taken into account. But we must remember that two thirds of the Poor Law authorities in the country were concerned with only a few hundred families and, therefore, might be expected to be familiar with the personal circumstances of relief recipients.

What use can be made of this evidence? It is conceivable that the Returns of the *Select Committee on Labourers' Wages* correctly depict the situation in 1824, but that great changes had been made since 1795. Perhaps the Allowance System was practiced everywhere in 1800 or in 1815. The policy of subsidizing wages met with little criticism so long as the war lasted. It was first condemned by both Commons and Lords in respective Committee Reports on the Poor Laws in 1817 and 1818, and the 1824 Committee was designed to add ammunition to the charge. We may suppose, therefore, that fewer parishes practiced outdoor relief to the able-bodied in 1824 than in previous years, and that those who persisted in the policy in 1824 must surely have made use of it before it came under attack. In other words, the eighteen counties which we have found to be Speenhamland counties in 1824 may be described as the hard core of the problem. Whatever the harmful effects of the Old Poor Law, they should be revealed by a comparison of conditions in this group of counties with all others.

III

Before proceeding to the comparison, we must ask how generously wages were subsidized. Do we have any reason to believe that wages in agriculture were below subsistence standards before the Allowance

System was introduced? The first piece of evidence we have is that of the bread scale devised by the Berkshire magistrates. The Berkshire scale began with the gallon loaf at a shilling and then increased with each rise of a penny up to two shillings: with the loaf selling at a shilling, a single man was guaranteed a minimum weekly income of 3s. with an additional 1s. 6d. for each dependent; with the loaf at two shillings, the minimum weekly income of a single man rose to 5s. and the allowance for dependents to 2s. 6d. A gallon loaf of bread is twenty ounces of bread per day which was estimated, reasonably enough, to constitute a minimum ration for a man at work. The idea was that one third of income was to be spent on bread, leaving a margin for rent, heat, clothing, and other foodstuffs. Thus, in cheap years, a family with three children was said to require an income of 9s. a week, spending 3s. on bread—a gallon loaf for the man and two loaves for his four dependents—and 6s. on other things. In dear years, with the gallon loaf at 2s., the bread allowance would double to 6s., leaving a margin of 9s. on the notion that the prices of things in general rise by 50 per cent when the price of bread doubles.

In 1795, a single man working full time in the Midlands or the southern counties would have earned about 8s. 6d. a week. Supplements in kind, which were common in rural districts, would bring this up to about 10s. a week. If he was unemployed, the scale allowed him 5s. in a dear year like 1795. If he married and had a child, his wife and he together might earn 15s. a week; out of work, the scale allowed him 10s. a week. This was hardly a temptation to marry and breed recklessly! Indeed, so modest was the Speenhamland scale that the Webbs calculated that it allowed a family with two children "about one-half of what a parsimonious Board of Guardians would today [1926] regard as bare subsistence."⁷ Nevertheless, existing wage levels in agriculture frequently fell below the Speenhamland minimum. If a married man had a few children young enough to keep his wife at home, he could not possibly earn enough to support his family at the famine prices that prevailed during the Napoleonic wars. And this is precisely why the idea of a minimum wage law as an alternative to the bread scale was rejected in 1795; if it took account of variations in the size of families, it implied a wage far in excess of prevailing rates.⁸

When the Allowance System came to be criticized in the closing years of the war, one reaction was simply to reduce the bread scale or

⁷ *Poor Law History*, p. 182.

⁸ See *ibid.*, pp. 170-73.

to abandon it in favor of some loose index of food prices in general. An examination of the local scales in use in various parishes shows that they were indeed pared down everywhere, so that by 1825 they had dropped on the average by about one third from their original level.⁹ But money wages in agriculture were no higher on the average in 1825 than in 1795, and even in 1835 they still stood below the Speenhamland minimum. The Commissioners of 1834 found out to their surprise that the cost of maintaining workhouse inmates at a minimum diet sometimes exceeded the wages of agricultural workers in surrounding districts.¹⁰

It is clear then that the Allowance System subsidized what in fact were substandard wages. At the same time, the scale at which outdoor relief was given does not suggest that it could have devitalized the working class by offering an attractive alternative to gainful employment. Nevertheless, the bread scale tied the relief bill to the price of wheat, and its effect on the volume of relief spending shows up quite clearly: the peaks and troughs in the two series coincide almost perfectly.¹¹

It is apparent from the variations in the gazette price of wheat that 1811-1812, 1816-1817, 1823-1825, and 1828-1831 were years of poor harvests when both relief spending and the price of wheat rose. As we might expect, the cry of "agricultural distress" was loudest in the bumper-crop years of 1813-1815, 1820-1822, and 1832-1835, all of which show falling Poor Law expenditures.

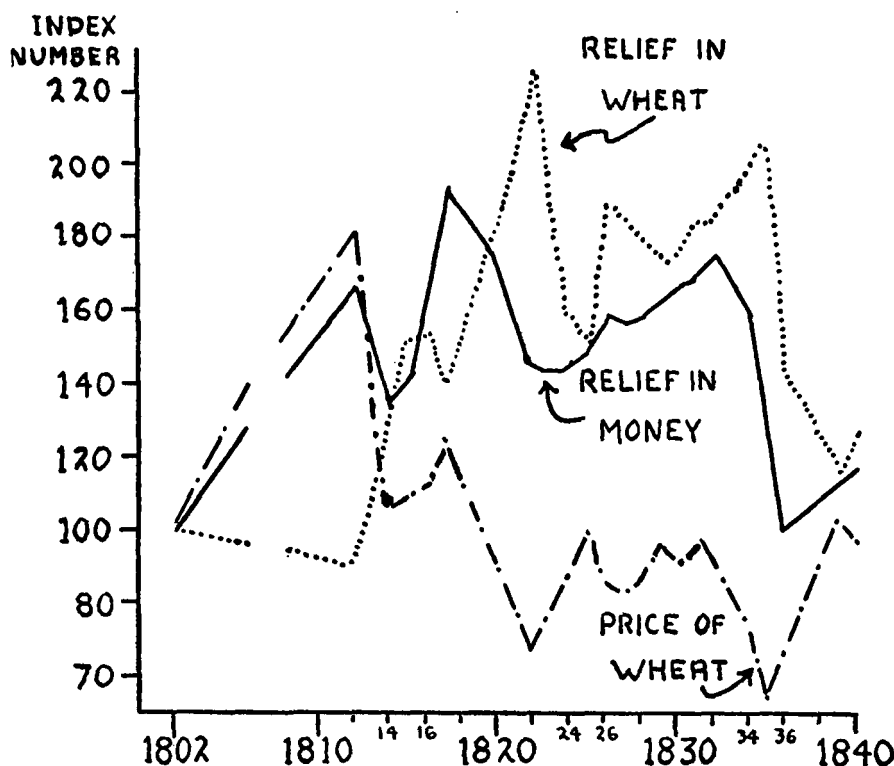
It will be noticed that "real" relief in terms of wheat generally varied inversely with money relief up to 1834. This phenomenon might be taken as further evidence of the influence of the bread scales: the scales were so devised that they did not vary proportionately with the price of bread; hence, real relief fell in dear years and rose in cheap years. But this could well be an illusion. By itself, the inverse relationship between real and money relief tells us nothing more than that money expenditures on relief never rose or declined as fast as the price of wheat. It is easy to explain why the relief bill did not rise as fast as wheat prices: as the burden on the rates increased, the parish officers simply drew the

⁹ See *ibid.*, pp. 182-83; J. L. and B. Hammond, *The Village Labourer* (4th ed.; London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1927). E. M. Hampson, *The Treatment of Poverty in Cambridgeshire, 1579-1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1934), pp. 195-96.

¹⁰ See S. E. Finer, *The Life and Times of Sir Edwin Chadwick* (London: Methuen Co., 1952).

¹¹ There are no official figures available for total relief expenditures in the years 1785-1801 and 1803-1811. For sources see Appendices A and B.

GRAPH 1



strings tighter. It is not so obvious why the relief bill should have lagged behind falling wheat prices. But when one considers the inertia that characterized Poor Law administration in the period, the lag is not really surprising.

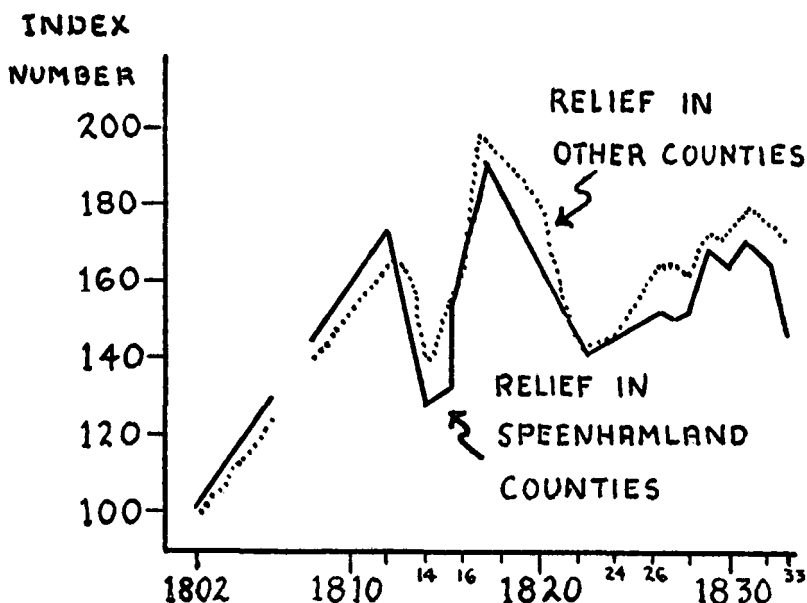
Total relief spending showed a sharp upward trend after 1795, reaching a peak in 1818, after which it declined again to a low point in 1823. In the latter part of the 1820's, the trend was upward once again. Earlier we hypothesized that the predominance of bad years over good leads to rising relief expenditures if the amount of relief given is tied to the price of wheat. We can now test this hypothesis. Out of the twenty-five years from 1793 to 1818 only 1796, 1814, and 1815 were years of abundant harvests, and as many as fourteen crops in this period were seriously deficient. In contrast, good harvests were prevalent in the decade after 1818; in particular, the yield and quality

of the harvests of 1819, 1820, and 1821 were without precedent.¹² Thus, without resorting to additional considerations, it is possible to account for the sharp rise in poor relief expenditures up to 1818 and the decline thereafter by "long waves" in climatic conditions. This should serve to check hasty generalizations about the economic causes of a trend in the total relief bill.

IV

The amount of poor relief per head was generally higher in the eighteen counties we have designated as Speenhamland counties than elsewhere. In 1802, it averaged 12s. in the Speenhamland counties and 8s. in the non-Speenhamland counties; by 1831, the average in the first group had risen to 13s. 8d. while the average in the second group had only increased to 8s. 7d.¹³ Such figures assume, of course, that there were no variations in the accuracy of population statistics between counties, an assumption which we know to be false. Nevertheless, the pattern is so pronounced that we may ignore the shortcomings of the

GRAPH 2



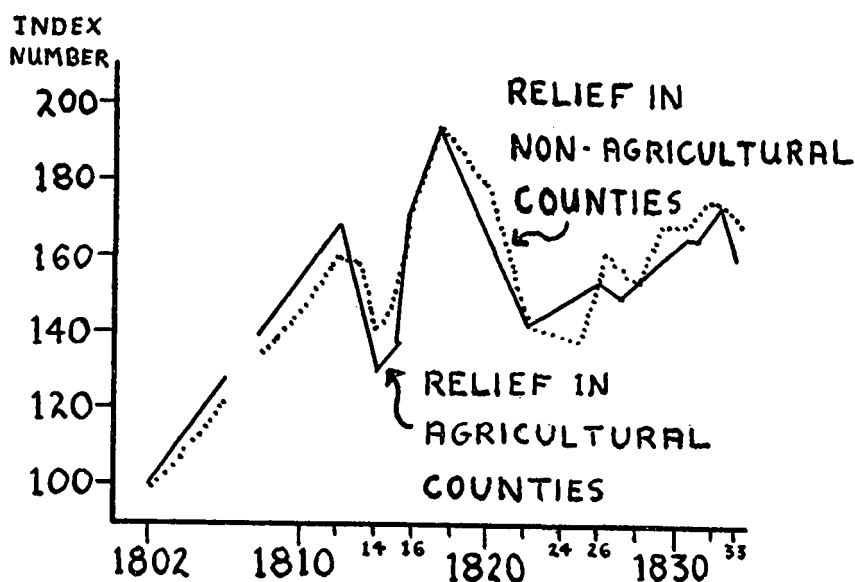
¹² T. Tooke, *History of Prices* (1857), VI, App. 6.

¹³ See Appendix A.

data. Having said this much, it must be added that there appear to be no other significant differences in the pattern of relief expenditures between the Speenhamland and the non-Speenhamland counties. For example, if we compare the rate of change of total expenditures in the two groups of counties, we discover that they varied with remarkable similarity.¹⁴

In view of the fact that the Allowance System was almost entirely a rural problem in a particular part of the country, it is surprising to find so much coincidence between the two series. Would it make a difference if instead we grouped together the agricultural counties and contrasted their poor relief expenditures with the nonagricultural counties? It should make a difference: while all the Speenhamland counties fall into the agricultural category, some agricultural counties are not Speenhamland counties.¹⁵ But again, despite some differences in the amplitude of fluctuations, the peaks and troughs coincide.

GRAPH 3



Earlier we attributed increases in relief spending to the occurrence of poor harvests, and we showed that relief in agricultural counties rose and fell with the state of the harvest. But, in that case, what are we to make of the fact that relief in nonagricultural counties followed

¹⁴ For sources see Appendix B.

¹⁵ See Appendix C for the derivation of the series.

so closely upon the pattern in rural areas? The explanation lies in the fact that cycles in industrial activity in this period were closely geared to fluctuations in the harvest. A markedly deficient harvest called for an increase in grain imports which put pressure on the money market, leading to a reduction in investment and employment; owing to the inelastic demand for wheat, the rise in wheat prices redistributed income from consumers to farmers; since the marginal propensity to consume of farmers was lower than that of consumers in general, the result was to lower aggregate expenditures on consumption. Conversely, an abundant domestic harvest increased the level of effective demand throughout the economy.¹⁶ Thus, despite differences in the administration of the Poor Laws, relief spending rose and fell more or less simultaneously in all counties.

What can we learn from a graphic comparison of the two series? It appears that relief rose faster than population in all counties up to 1812, and at a fairly uniform rate. It is tempting to credit this to lax administration of relief fostered by the emergency feelings of wartime. In 1803, Parliament ordered parish officers to give the wives and children of militiamen a weekly allowance equal to the current daily wage of agricultural labor; this added about 5-8 per cent to Poor Law expenditures in the years 1812-1814. Nevertheless, such was the rise in prices during the war that the purchasing power of total relief was probably no higher in 1812 than in 1795. With the great break in wheat prices in 1813, relief expenditures were cut back everywhere, more successfully in rural than in industrial districts. The downward trend was short-lived, however. By 1816, the difficulties of conversion to peacetime production made new demands on the Poor Law authorities. In 1817 and 1818, the government found itself obliged to set the unemployed to work on road projects, financed by the sale of public bonds. With the improvement of conditions after 1818, the burden on the poor rates fell everywhere although in real terms the amount of relief given was still rising. The huge harvests of 1819-1821 gave an edge to the agricultural counties where relief fell faster than in the industrial districts. Parliament's stern condemnation of the Allowance System in 1818, however, seems to have had some effect: the downward trend in relief spending is more pronounced in the Speenhamland than in the non-Speenhamland counties. The industrial boom of 1822-1825 shows

¹⁶ See A. D. Gayer, W. W. Rostow, A. J. Schwartz, *Economic Fluctuations in the British Economy, 1790-1850* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953), II, 563-64, 793, 854; R. C. O. Matthews, *A Study in Trade-Cycle History* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1954), ch. 4.

up in the stability of poor relief expenditures in nonagricultural counties; in agriculture, these were not prosperous years. With the crash of 1825, relief spending in nonagricultural counties rose sharply, but thereafter the pattern in the industrial and agricultural areas did not differ significantly. The Poor Law officers in the Speenhamland counties, however, had come to heed the alarm at the rising burden on the rates: although the general trend was upwards from 1823-1831, they prevented relief spending from increasing as fast in their parishes as it did in the country as a whole.

A comparison of index numbers cannot reveal differences that are present at the outset and that persist through time. We have noted that relief per head was consistently higher in the Speenhamland counties than elsewhere. It was also higher in the agricultural counties than in the nonagricultural counties. What we have just demonstrated is that whatever the reason for this pattern in the absolute amount of *per capita* relief, it was not seriously influenced before 1834 either by differences in the administration of the Poor Laws in different counties or by an alleged deterioration of agriculture under the influence of allowances-in-aid-of-wages. There is no evidence whatever of that most popular of all the charges levied at the Old Poor Law: the "snow-ball effect" of outdoor relief to the able-bodied.

This still leaves us without an explanation of the higher absolute burden of the poor rates in certain counties, to which we now turn.

V

Trustworthy statistics for agricultural wages in this period are available on a county basis for the years 1795, 1824, 1833, 1837, and 1850. Wage data for agricultural workers are notoriously difficult to interpret. It is not only that they are subject to sharp seasonal variations; they are frequently augmented by money payments for task work and by payments in kind in the form of food, drink, fuel, and cheap rents. Although such supplements to cash earnings varied a good deal between counties in the nineteenth century, being higher oddly enough where money payments were higher, rural conservatism makes it plausible to assume that they did not vary radically from decade to decade. It appears that the ratio of total earnings to money wages changed little throughout the century, earnings generally exceeding wages by 15-20 per cent.¹⁷ Thus, changes in the trend of money wages

¹⁷ See Appendix D.

can be interpreted as reflecting changes in the trend of total earnings.

To test the effect of the Speenhamland policy, I have formed a composite index of the standard weekly money wage of agricultural workers in all counties which practiced the Allowance System in 1824.¹⁸ The county is admittedly a poor unit over which to take an average of wages: in many counties, wages varied significantly from district to district. For example, the average wage in Middlesex, including as it does London, has little meaning. Still, we must make do with what we have. The comparison reveals the following:

	1795	1824	1833	1837	1850
Speenhamland Counties	100	100	124	106	104
Average for England and Wales	100	108	120	115	108

For Britain as a whole, the general picture is that of a rise from 1795 to about 1812 and a fall from 1813 to a low in 1824, but evidence about these years is very uncertain. Wages rose again in the latter half of the 1820's, varied little in the 1830's, and then moved down again in the 1840's. Given the rise in the price level during the war, agricultural workers were probably not much better off in 1824 than in 1795. But with the cost of living falling as much as 25 per cent between 1825 and 1850, real wages were much higher at the end of the period.

On the face of it, it seems that the Speenhamland policy depressed agricultural wages between 1795 and 1824. Strangely enough, however, in the decade before the passage of the Poor Law Amendment Act, wages in the Speenhamland counties recovered the ground lost during the war and immediate postwar years. We could attribute this result to stricter enforcement of the Poor Laws in the Speenhamland counties after 1824. But, in that case, why the rapid decline in the years 1833-1850, after the Act of 1834 had crushed out the Allowance System?

In 1851, Caird drew a line through the middle of England to distinguish the high-wage counties of the North from the low-wage counties of the South. Above the Caird line, the money wages of agricultural workers averaged more than 10s. per week in 1824; below the line, they averaged less, except in Middlesex, Surrey, and Kent. If we hold with Clapham that "the thorough-going adoption of the Speenhamland policy coupled with the working of poor law settlement tended to keep down the standard weekly money wage of agricultural labour," what accounts for the low wages of Wales and the whole of

¹⁸ See Appendix E.

the Southwest and West Midlands where the Allowance System was eschewed?¹⁹ Moreover, agricultural wages in the North were not noticeably lower in the East and North Riding, where wages were subsidized out of the poor rates, than in other northern counties where they were not. And in the northern Midlands, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire, both Speenhamland counties, paid wages above the national average. The fact that the Speenhamland counties were generally located below the Caird wage-line should not be submitted as evidence that subsidies depressed wages. On the contrary, the causal relationship seems to run the other way: wages were only subsidized when, for other reasons, they were too low to provide a minimum standard of living.

The picture of sharp wage differentials for equivalent kinds of labor between the North and the South—differentials which exceeded the real cost of transfer from one region to the other—dates back to the eighteenth century and persisted throughout the nineteenth century. In 1824, the range between the northern and southern counties was about 4s; by the end of the century, it had risen to 5s.²⁰ Superimposed upon that pattern was another, which reflected the pull of rapidly growing towns upon the immediately surrounding countryside: in the South, the greater was the distance from London, the lower was the wage, and in the North the same thing was true of the Lancashire towns Manchester and Liverpool, and the Yorkshire towns Leeds and Sheffield. The internal migration of workers which accompanied the Industrial Revolution largely took the form of short-distance travel to the nearest factory town. The people who moved into the cotton towns came almost exclusively from Lancashire and Cheshire itself, or from Ireland. Migration into London came from the extra-metropolitan parts of Middlesex and Surrey, and to a lesser extent from the surrounding counties of Kent, Essex, Hertfordshire and Berkshire. Similarly, migration into the Midland iron towns of Warwickshire came from the county itself or from Staffordshire and Worcestershire to the west.²¹ The pull of these towns not only raised wages in the surrounding rural areas by reducing the supply of labor, but also increased the demand

¹⁹ Clapham, *The Railway Age*, p. 125. He cited a few Speenhamland counties which show a fall of wages between 1795 and 1824, but does not mention Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Norfolk, Essex, Cambridge, Northamptonshire, Warwick and Devon—all Speenhamland counties—where wages were higher in 1824 than in 1795.

²⁰ See C. S. Orwin, B. I. Felton, "A Century of Wages and Earnings in Agriculture," *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society*, 92 (1931).

²¹ See A. Redford *Labour Migration in England, 1800-1850* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1926), ch. 11, and appendices.

for labor by providing a dependable expanding market for agricultural produce. This accounts for the high level of agricultural wages in the North as well as the relatively higher wage levels in farm areas around London. We have already mentioned the fact that wages in Middlesex, Kent, and Surrey compared favorably with the North. Precisely for that reason, the parish officers did not resort to the Speenhamland policy in these counties. But even in East Anglia, where wages were supplemented by the Poor Law authorities, proximity to London produced wages higher than those in the Southwest where wages were not subsidized. Again, in Sussex, the most notorious Speenhamland county, agricultural wages were higher than in any county in the South except those immediately around London.

We can hardly resist the conclusion that the parish officers only had recourse to the policy of subsidizing wages wherever the attraction of urban industry made itself felt too weakly, leaving a pool of surplus manpower and substandard wages.²²

VI

It was a favorite doctrine of the Poor Law reformers of 1834 that the abolition of outdoor relief to the unemployed would soon dissipate "the false and unreal appearance of surplus labour"; no labor surplus actually existed, they argued, apart from what had been artificially created by the operation of the Old Poor Law. They recommended emigration from the southern counties but only in the transition period from the old scheme to the new.²³ Nevertheless, the Assistant Commissioners found much evidence of structural unemployment in the Speenhamland counties of the South, and their testimony is particularly clear and detailed for the case of Sussex.²⁴ The natural periodicity

²² Another explanation suggests itself. The *Report of 1834* presented some evidence to show that small parishes, measured in terms of population per acre, granted more relief per head than large parishes, the reason being that the intimate personal connections between magistrates and farm hands in small parishes invited prodigality. If this were so, the high rates of relief per head in southern rural counties might be due to the fact that most of the 1,000 parishes under fifty inhabitants and most of the 6,000 under three hundred inhabitants were located in southern agricultural districts. To test this hypothesis, we would have to examine the size distribution of parishes among counties, a question which cannot be entered into here.

²³ In the years 1835-1837, they arranged for the migration of about 5,000 workers to the northern factory districts. In the same period, some 6,500 Poor Law emigrants went overseas, and in both cases about half of the migrants came from the East Anglian counties of Norfolk and Suffolk. Redford, *Labour Migration*, p. 94.

²⁴ For a review of the evidence, see N. Gash, "Rural Unemployment, 1815-1834," *Economic History Review*, VI, No. 1 (Oct. 1935). The records of the Emigration Inquiry of 1826-1827 supply additional evidence of redundant labor in the southern rural counties: See Clapham, *The Railway Age*, pp. 64-65.

of arable farming found in the wheat-growing counties threw workers entirely on the parish rates for three or four winter months. Seasonal unemployment was much less of a problem in the West, where no wheat was grown. This might explain why the Speenhamland policy was not adopted in the western counties.²⁵ The main wheat-growing area lay east of Cobden's famous line from "Inverness to Southampton," and the bulk of the domestic wheat supply was produced on the stiff clay lands of eight southeastern counties. There is a striking coincidence, therefore, between the spread of Speenhamland and the production of wheat. Moreover, the wheat-producing counties were also areas of maximum recent enclosure.²⁶ Although it was mostly waste lands which were enclosed in this period, thus adding to employment opportunities, the enclosure movement increased the concentration on wheat, giving rise to the characteristic problem of winter unemployment.

Furthermore, the practice of boarding young unmarried farm workers and guaranteeing them a fixed income irrespective of weather, which was still very common in the North, had by this time given way in the South to the day laborer hired at standard rates. Thus, seasonal unemployment became a social problem in southern agricultural counties which had to be dealt with by public action. The solution was the Roundsman System, which took up the slack by letting everyone work at low intensity; to have allowed wages to fall in order to clear the labor market would only have further reduced the productivity of labor via its depressing effect on the caloric value of the workers' diets.

In the nature of the case, it is very difficult to obtain direct evidence of disguised unemployment, and in practice it may be impossible to distinguish visible seasonal unemployment from invisible structural unemployment. Indeed, since the labor surplus is disguised by reducing the required effort of each worker, the situation gives the appearance of a labor deficit at low wage levels. At higher wages, the work done by each man would increase so rapidly that the deficit would be converted into a labor surplus. In other words, substandard wages, which are nevertheless above the level that automatic market forces would produce, are part of the mechanism which disguises a pool of surplus manpower in an underdeveloped country. Disguised unemployment may be said to exist when it is possible to release workers by means of a simple reorganization of production without

²⁵ G. C. Fussell, M. Compton, "Agricultural Adjustments after the Napoleonic Wars," *Economic History* (Feb. 1939), show that it was the grain-growing areas which were hit hardest in the postwar years.

²⁶ Clapham, *The Railway Age*, pp. 19-22, 124, 467.

significantly affecting output; but history rarely performs that decisive experiment, and so we must fall back on inference.

Apart from direct evidence of seasonal and technological unemployment in English agriculture, we have other reasons to believe that the countryside was overpopulated at this time. By 1834, manufacturing was already effectively concentrated in the large towns of Lancashire, Cheshire, and Yorkshire. Previously, it had been scattered throughout the country districts. The most famous example of the decay of local industry in this era is the migration of the woollen and worsted industry from East Anglia to the West Riding. But all through the South in, say, 1800 one would have found, here and there, maltings and breweries; iron, paper, snuff, and flour mills; leather, parchment, and printing works; silk-spinning and silk-weaving factories; and various home industries making hose, ribbons, laces, strings, and cotton goods.²⁷ The gradual disappearance of this source of demand for labor in rural areas is rarely given its proper due in accounting for the increased burden of poor relief expenditures. To be sure, the decay of rural industries was a very slow process which took place rapidly in the second rather than the first half of the nineteenth century. But in the second half of the century, the rate of emigration from rural districts was commensurate with the decline of employment opportunities in the countryside. It was the relative immobility of rural labor that made the decay of cottage industry a serious problem in the heyday of the Industrial Revolution.

The abolition of outdoor relief to the unemployed in 1834, at least in the agricultural counties of the South, did not by itself solve the problem of structural unemployment in the countryside. Even ten years later, when reliable figures about the number of people on relief first became available, the Speenhamland counties headed the list with 12-15 per cent of the population on relief, whereas the percentage relieved in the non-Speenhamland counties was typically no more than 6-7 per cent.²⁸ What is more, in the 1851 census all the Speenhamland counties were found to be losing population to London or to the factory towns of the North—the only exception being Warwickshire, containing Birmingham.²⁹ This fact alone is indicative of rural overpopulation in the first half of the century.

²⁷ See Lord Ernle, *English Farming, Past and Present* (6th ed.; London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1961), pp. 308-12.

²⁸ The official returns for the year 1844 are found in J. R. McCulloch, *A Descriptive and Statistical Account of the British Empire* (1854), II, p. 670.

²⁹ Redford, *Labour Migration*, appendix 1, map A.

VII

We bring our analysis of the Old Poor Law to a close by briefly considering the remaining items in the traditional bill of indictment: it promoted the growth of population; it lowered rents; it reduced "yeomanry"; and, most general of all, it depressed agricultural output by destroying incentives.

It may be surprising that we have come so far without saying very much about the Malthusian objection to the Old Poor Law. It is simply that not much can be said. It is worth noting, of course, that the rate of population growth was no smaller in Scotland and Ireland, where earned incomes were never supplemented by the Poor Law authorities. Malthus himself added an appendix to the 1826 edition of his *Essay on the Principles of Population* which conceded that the Old Poor Law did not in fact "greatly encourage population."

The residence requirements of the Settlement Act, he argued, gave landlords a motive to pull down cottages on their estates; the scarcity of rural housing kept the Poor Laws from encouraging marriages. Be that as it may, estimates of birth and death rates for this period depend on the baptisms and burials entered in the parish registers and, as has been shown recently, there was a marked increase in the failure to register between 1780 and 1820; moreover the deficiencies in registration were not randomly distributed among counties.³⁰ This renders suspect any quantitative statement about the effects of the Old Poor Law on population growth.

Nevertheless, it has been argued that the death rate only became an important element in the "population explosion" after 1820, not, as is usually alleged, after 1780. Between 1780 and 1820, it was the rising birth rate which enlarged the size of families, and this was due in part to the Old Poor Law.³¹ Most of the Speenhamland counties had fertility ratios above the national average, and Sussex had the highest fertility ratio of any county in 1821. But the northern industrial counties also showed fertility ratios above the national average. After 1821, fertility ratios began to fall in the Speenhamland counties, either because of stricter administration of relief or because of the agricultural

³⁰ J. T. Krause, "Changes in English Fertility and Mortality, 1781-1850," *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, IX (August 1958).

³¹ *Ibid.*, and T. H. Marshall, "The Population Problem During the Industrial Revolution: A Note on the Present State of the Controversy," *Economic History*, 1929, reprinted in *Essays in Economic History*, ed. E. M. Carus-Wilson (London: Edward Arnold, 1954), I.

revival. But similarly, fertility ratios fell even faster in the North. A fertility *ratio*, however, is not the same thing as the fertility or crude birth *rate*, being defined as the number of children between zero and four years per 1,000 women between the ages of fifteen and forty-nine. High fertility ratios may be produced by a fall in infant mortality, swelling the number of births registered. In the Speenhamland counties, more generous relief may have worked to reduce the number of infant deaths and in this way increased registered births. To be sure, this implies that the Old Poor Law did promote population growth, but via the death rate rather than the birth rate.

It has also been argued that the family endowment features of Speenhamland induced farmers to hire married men with children rather than single men as a method of lightening the rate burden, thus discouraging family limitation. This may have been an important consideration in small parishes where farmers knew the private circumstances of each hired hand. But in larger parishes, an expressed preference for married men must have encouraged workers to misrepresent their situation. On the whole, there is no persuasive evidence that, as the saying went at the time, "population was raised by bounties." Even the bastardy laws, which made it possible for unmarried mothers to claim support from a putative father, do not explain the increase in illegitimate births in the Speenhamland counties down to 1834. Illegitimacy was even higher in the northern industrial counties where the laws of bastardy were not stringently enforced. It seems that the Poor Laws, as Rickman said in the preamble to the census of 1821, were "much less conducive to an Increase of Population than they are usually stated to be in Argument."

Next, there is the contention that the Old Poor Law operated to depress rents. This argument depends entirely upon the way in which the poor rates were actually assessed. They were paid in the first instance by farmers and other estate-dwellers, not by landlords. Assessments seem to have been based on the annual value of lands and real estate occupied, but both the Poor Law Commissioners of 1834 and Cannan, the modern historian of local rating in England, were unable to determine the exact principle upon which they were calculated prior to 1835.³² It is clear that farmers bore the brunt of the rates even in industrial districts, and when rates were rising they may have pressed landlords for a reduction in rents. We recall, however, that the relief

³² E. Cannan, *The History of Local Rates in England* (4th ed.; London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1927), p. 80.

bill varied in the same direction as the income of farmers. Hence, it is far from obvious that rents were in fact reduced when the rates rose.

Wild charges about the poor rates "eating up all rents" circulated during and after the Napoleonic wars. The rates were set by the justices of the peace, the wealthy landowners of the county, who paid rates only insofar as they were occupiers of estates. The pressure on rents when rates were rising, if it came at all, came only after a lapse of time, determined by the customary length of tenant leases in the locality. With tenants-at-will, rentals might respond quickly to an upward trend in poor rates, but leases of seven to fourteen years were not uncommon, and these must have been very insensitive to increased overhead costs incurred by tenants. Thus, the link between rising rates and falling rents made itself felt in different degrees in different counties, supposing, of course, that there really was such a link. The problem is further complicated by the fact that a multitude of noneconomic considerations governed the relationship between landlord and tenant: landlords with political ambitions were sometimes willing to charge lower rents to favored tenants. For the Spennamland county of Warwickshire, the only county in which this subject has been investigated, it proved impossible to discover any connection between land rentals and ratable value as given in the parochial assessments.³³ Nevertheless, it is theoretically plausible that the incidence of the rates fell ultimately upon landlords, but we know so little about the trend in land rentals after 1815, that it must be left an open question.³⁴

The idea of the disappearance of "yeomanry" in this period is dealt with more quickly. Property owners were not eligible for relief and so, it is argued, the Old Poor Law discriminated against the cottage-proprietor seeking employment, as well as the smallholder who never used hired labor, but had to pay his share of the rates. But if the "yeoman" or occupying owner can ever be said to have disappeared from the land, it was in the eighteenth and not in the nineteenth century that he vanished.³⁵ There is evidence of some decline in the number

³³ A. W. Ashby, *One Hundred Years of Poor Law Administration in a Warwickshire Village. Oxford Studies in Social and Legal History*, ed. P. Vinogradoff (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), III, 57-58.

³⁴ For the available evidence, see Gayer, *et al.*, *Economic Fluctuations*, pp. 927-29.

³⁵ Clapham, *The Railway Age*, pp. 98-105, 430-32. E. Davies, "The Small Landowners, 1780-1832, in The Light of the Land Tax Assessments," *Economic History Review*, 1927, reprinted in *Essays in Economic History*, I; J. D. Chambers, "Enclosure and the Small Landowner," *Economic History Review*, X, No. 2 (Nov. 1940); J. D. Chambers, "Enclosure and Labor Supply in the Industrial Revolution," *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, V, No. 3 (1953).

of family farms after 1815, but it is impossible to separate the burden of poor rates from the many other difficulties which afflicted small-holders in the years of deflation after Waterloo.

Nor is the alleged decline in the efficiency of agricultural workers under the influence of the Old Poor Law discernible in statistics on production. There are no reliable series on wheat, barley, and oats production in this period, but isolated unofficial estimates all suggest a continued increase in output per acre during the first half of the nineteenth century. Despite the fact that population had doubled in those fifty years, imports of agricultural commodities never formed an important portion of the total supply, and contemporary observers were convinced that productivity in agriculture had risen.³⁶ In view of the failure of the money wages of agricultural workers to fall as fast as food prices through 1824-1850, it is difficult to deny this conviction.

We have come to the end of our journey to find that hardly any of the dire effects ascribed to the Old Poor Law stand up in the light of available empirical knowledge. This is negative proof at best, but even in theory the weight of forces is not all in one direction. We have to remember that a system of local rating provides its own checks to excessive expenditures. The Allowance System, for example, added to the wages paid by farmers with one hand what it took from them in rates with the other; the link between taxpayer and beneficiary was much closer than it is with modern income-support programs. Just as it is now realized that the Settlement Laws did not invariably work with the harsh and wasteful rigidity so often assumed,³⁷ so the Speenhamland policy was not always as imprudently administered as has been thought. And just as the extent to which "paupers" were really transported by parish officers cannot be deduced from the statute books, so the actual effects of the Allowance System cannot be inferred from the purple passages of the *Poor Law Report of 1834*.

VIII

The Old Poor Law, with its use of outdoor relief to assist the underpaid and to relieve the unemployed was, in essence, a device for dealing with the problem of surplus labor in the lagging rural sector of a rapidly

³⁶ See M. Blaug, *Ricardian Economics. A Historical Study* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1958), pp. 183-84.

³⁷ See D. Marshall, "The Old Poor Law, 1662-1795," *Economic History Review*, 1937, reprinted in *Essays in Economic History*, I.

expanding but still underdeveloped economy. And considering the quality of social administration in the day, it was by no means an unenlightened policy. The Poor Law Commissioners of 1834 thought otherwise and deliberately selected the facts so as to impeach the existing administration on predetermined lines. Not only did they fail in any way to take account of the special problem of structural unemployment in the countryside, but what evidence they did present consisted of little more than picturesque anecdotes of maladministration. Even the elaborate questionnaire which they circulated among the parishes was never analyzed or reduced to summary form. No attempt was made to take a census of the poor, and to this day we know more about the nature and composition of the pauper host in 1802 than in 1834. Anyone who has read the *Report of 1834* can testify to the overwhelming cumulative effect of the endless recital of ills from the mouths of squires, magistrates, overseers, and clergymen. But as evidence of a social malady it has little value, particularly on the ultimate question of the corrupting influence of lavish relief: in what age would it not be possible to collect complaints from the upper classes about the laziness of workers?

Nowhere in the *Report* is there any hint of a quantitative view of the problem. "This ignoring of statistics," as the Webbs remarked, "led, in the diagnosis, to disastrous errors in proportion; and made the suggested remedial measures lopsided and seriously imperfect." For example, Nassau William Senior, who wrote "the exposition of the evils of the old system" in the *Report*, surmised that "the able-bodied paupers and their families now amount to a million." Instead, the Webbs calculated that about 100,000 people were relieved indoors and 900,000 outdoors in 1834, of which perhaps 100,000, or at most 300,000 if we count all their dependents, were able-bodied workers.³⁸ In subsequent years, the Commissioners were to discover to their grief that the bulk of relief recipients were, indeed, not the able-bodied, but rather the helpless and dependent sick, aged, and infirm.³⁹ No wonder,

³⁸ Webbs, *Old Poor Law History*, p. 88n.

³⁹ This fact was carefully, and perhaps intentionally, hidden from the public. Throughout the remainder of the century, the Poor Law authorities displayed an incredible reluctance to supply any quantitative information about the body of people relieved, other than the ratio of outdoor to indoor relief recipients. Since some children and old people received outdoor relief, while a proportion of the able-bodied did enter the workhouse, we have no way of knowing just how many of the able-bodied received unemployment compensation; the "able-bodied" were not even defined by the Act of 1834 for purposes of administration. See M. Dessauer, "Unemployment Records, 1848-1859," *Economic History Review*, X, No. 1 (Feb. 1940).

the "harsh but salutary Act" fell short, at nearly every point, of affecting a sweeping reform. Gradually, so gradually as to be almost imperceptible to contemporaries, the "principles of 1834" were undermined in practice by the administration of successive governments, while competing public services increasingly took over the functions of the Poor Law.⁴⁰ The virtual abandonment of the Malthusian theory of population under the influence of the downward trend in births, the growing recognition of urban destitution caused by involuntary unemployment, the concern over sweated trades, all these contributed to "the breaking-up of the Poor Law." Nevertheless, the *Report of 1834* remained a force against which all changes had to make their way, and the public was still told by the Poor Law authorities that any abrogation of the "principles of 1834" would give a spur to population and thus bring wages down. As late as 1893, Alfred Marshall remarked to the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor: "It seems that whenever I read Poor Law literature of today I am taken back to the beginning of the century; everything that is said about economics has the flavour of that old time."

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APPENDIX A
POOR RELIEF PER HEAD, BY COUNTIES (s., d.)

<i>Spceenhamland Counties</i>	1802	1812	1821	1831
Sussex	22.7	33.1	23.8	19.4
Bucks	16.1	22.9	19.1	18.7
Wilts	13.11	24.5	15.8	16.9
Beds	11.9	17.6	16.6	16.11
Berks	15.1	27.1	17.0	15.9
Hunts	12.2	16.9	16.0	15.3
Suffolk	11.5	19.4	18.0	18.4
Norfolk	12.5	20.0	15.7	15.4
Dorset	11.4	17.5	13.3	11.5
Essex	12.1	24.7	20.0	17.2
Cambridge	12.1	17.0	14.9	13.8
Oxford	16.2	24.10	19.1	16.11
Northants	14.5	19.11	19.2	16.10
Leicester	12.4	14.8	16.6	11.7
Warwick	11.3	13.4	12.0	9.7
Devon	7.3	11.5	10.8	9.0
Notts	6.4	10.10	9.5	6.6
York, E. R.	7.6	12.6	13.0	11.11
York, N. R.	6.5	8.4	9.6	8.9
Average	12.3	18.8	16.4	13.8

⁴⁰ See H. L. Beales, "The New Poor Law," *History*, 1931, reprinted in *Essays in Economic History*, ed. E. M. Carus-Wilson (London: Edward Arnold, 1962), III.

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Non-Speenhamland Counties	1802	1812	1821	1831
Kent	13.6	17.1	18.5	14.5
Hants	12.2	18.4	14.11	13.10
Surrey	10.0	13.6	13.11	10.11
Herts	11.5	13.10	15.1	13.2
Worcester	10.3	11.11	10.1	7.6
Rutland	10.1	13.8	12.3	9.1
Hereford	10.5	17.9	14.0	11.4
Lincoln	9.2	10.10	12.3	11.0
Somerset	8.11	12.3	9.11	8.10
Gloucester	8.8	11.7	9.10	8.8
York, W. R.	6.6	9.11	8.2	5.7
Stafford	6.11	8.6	8.10	6.6
Chester	6.11	10.0	8.4	6.3
Cornwall	5.10	9.5	9.1	6.8
Derby	6.9	10.2	9.1	6.8
Durham	6.6	9.11	10.1	6.10
Salop	7.11	11.5	10.4	8.2
Northumberland	6.8	7.11	7.11	6.3
Cumberland	4.9	6.9	7.4	5.6
Westmoreland	6.8	9.9	11.0	9.8
Lancaster	4.5	7.5	5.6	4.5
Middlesex	8.7	10.7	11.10	10.1
Monmouth	8.0	9.1	7.9	5.5
Wales	5.7	7.7	7.2	7.2
Average	8.4	11.4	10.2	8.7
Select Towns				
Manchester	4.7	9.8	3.9
Birmingham	6.2	9.6	7.11
Bristol	5.7	6.5	9.8
Liverpool	6.6	6.5	6.2

Sources: The counties are listed in each category roughly in order of average relief per head. The figures are obtained by dividing the "annual expenditures for the poor" reported for each county by the county population as given by the census returns. Up to 1849, Poor Law Returns were reported annually for the year that ends at Lady Day (March 25). Hence, figures for, say, 1803, are here regarded as referring to 1802, and so forth. The available official returns up to 1830 are conveniently found in Marshall, *Digest of All the Accounts*, pp. 36-37. The figures for the towns are also derived from Marshall, *ibid.*, p. 41. The returns for the year 1831-1833 are given in P. P. 1835 (444), XLVII. The figures for county populations are derived from the decennial censuses of 1801, 1811, 1821, and 1831, as given by J. R. McCulloch, *Descriptive and Statistical Account of the British Empire*, II, 400.

Andrew Ure in his *Philosophy of Manufactures* (1835), p. 477, gives figures for poor relief per head in what he calls "factory counties" for 1801, 1811, 1821, and 1831, based, as he says, on the official returns. Since poor relief expenditures were not returned for the years 1801 and 1811, he probably applied a method similar to my own, dividing decennial census data on population into figures on relief spending for the years 1802 and 1812. His series generally agree with mine, except that they are all unaccountably lower for 1821.

APPENDIX B

TOTAL POOR RELIEF EXPENDITURES IN ENGLAND AND WALES

Years	Total (£, 000)	Average Price of Wheat per Quarter (s. d.)	Index of Relief in Wheat	Relief in Spokenhamland Counties (£, 000)	Index	Relief in Other Counties (£, 000)	Index
1802	4,078	60.10	100	1,782	100	2,296	100
1812	6,676	126.6	90	2,975	170	3,701	161
1813	6,295	109.9	98	2,672	145	3,623	160
1814	5,419	74.4	125	2,223	125	3,196	139
1815	5,725	65.7	149	2,279	130	3,447	150
1816	6,918	78.6	151	2,971	170	3,947	171
1817	7,890	96.11	139	3,374	190	4,516	197
1818	7,532	86.3	148	3,174	180	4,358	190
1819	7,330	74.6	168	3,069	172	4,261	185
1820	6,958	67.10	176	2,894	163	4,064	176
1821	6,359	56.1	194	2,673	150	3,686	160
1822	5,773	44.7	223	2,549	143	3,224	140
1823	5,734	53.4	185	2,473	139	3,261	142
1824	5,787	63.11	155	2,498	140	3,289	143
1825	5,929	68.6	148	2,579	145	3,350	146
1826	6,441	58.8	188	2,704	151	3,738	162
1827	6,298	58.6	184	2,616	147	3,716	162
1828	6,332	60.5	179	2,683	150	3,649	160
1829	6,829	66.3	170	2,937	165	3,892	169
1830	6,799	64.3	182	2,905	163	3,894	169
1831	7,037	66.4	182	2,997	170	4,040	176
1832	6,791	58.8	199	2,903	163	3,888	170
1833	6,317	52.11	204	2,596	146	3,721	169

Source: Average monthly gazette prices per quarter of wheat are given by Gayer, Rostow, Schwartz, *Fluctuations, Microfilm Supplement*, pp. 650-51. Since the poor relief figures run from March 25 of one year to March 25 of the next, I have averaged annual wheat prices on the same basis.

APPENDIX C

POOR RELIEF EXPENDITURES IN AGRICULTURAL AND
NONAGRICULTURAL COUNTIES IN ENGLAND AND WALES

<i>Years</i>	<i>Agricultural</i> (£, 000)	<i>Index</i>	<i>Nonagricultural</i> (£, 000)	<i>Index</i>
1802	1,672	100	2,405	100
1812	2,822	169	3,835	160
1813	2,563	152	3,731	155
1814	2,137	128	3,281	137
1815	2,286	136	3,438	143
1816	2,839	170	4,072	170
1817	3,227	193	4,644	193
1818	3,028	181	4,489	187
1819	2,891	171	4,440	185
1820	2,748	164	4,211	175
1821	2,568	153	3,791	158
1822	2,370	140	3,402	142
1823	2,409	144	3,328	140
1824	2,443	146	3,344	140
1825	2,492	149	3,437	140
1826	2,582	153	3,859	161
1827	2,514	150	3,784	158
1828	2,594	154	3,739	155
1829	2,787	167	4,042	170
1830	2,789	167	4,010	170
1831	2,892	173	4,145	173
1832	2,766	166	4,025	170
1833	2,586	153	3,732	155
1834	2,295	140	2,232	136
1840	1,772	106	3,114	130
1850	1,723	103	3,239	134

Source: Gayer, Rostow, and Schwartz used decennial census figures on occupational distribution, by counties, to divide the counties into the two classes: *Ibid.*, p. 1678. Such counties as Devon, Kent, Somerset, Hampshire, Salop, and the East Riding were borderline cases and the decision had to be made on the basis of a qualitative judgment. Twenty-six counties and the West Riding were designated nonagricultural; the remaining fifteen counties, including East and North Riding, were designated agricultural counties. For a terse description of the character of economic activity in each of the counties in this period, see McCulloch, *Descriptive and Statistical Account*, I, 142-225.

APPENDIX D

WEEKLY MONEY WAGES OF AGRICULTURAL WORKERS, BY COUNTIES (*s. d.*)

<i>Counties</i>	<i>1795</i>	<i>1824</i>	<i>1833</i>	<i>1837</i>	<i>1850</i>
Middlesex	8.0	11.3	13.0	11.6	11.0
Surrey	10.6	10.8	12.0	10.6	9.6
Kent	10.6	11.9	13.1	12.0	11.6
Sussex	10.0	9.6	12.1	10.7	10.6
Hants	9.0	8.6	10.2	9.6	9.0
Berks	9.0	8.9	10.5	9.0	7.6
Southeastern Average	9.6	10.1	11.10	10.6	9.10
Index number	100	107	126	111	104
Oxford	8.6	8.1	10.1	8.6	9.0
Herts	8.0	9.0	11.0	9.6	9.0
Bucks	8.0	8.3	10.2	9.6	8.6
Northants	7.0	8.0	10.3	9.0	9.0
Hunts	8.6	7.6	10.5	9.6	8.6
Beds	7.6	8.6	10.0	9.6	9.0
Cambridge	8.2	9.0	10.6	9.6	7.6
South Midlands Average	8.0	8.4	10.4	9.3	8.8
Index number	100	105	129	114	109
Essex	9.0	9.4	10.3	10.4	8.0
Suffolk	10.6	8.3	9.11	10.4	7.0
Norfolk	9.0	9.2	10.9	10.4	8.6
Eastern Average	9.6	8.11	10.4	10.4	7.10
Index number	100	94	109	109	83
Wilts	8.4	7.6	9.1	8.0	7.3
Dorset	8.0	6.11	8.2	7.6	7.6
Devon	7.0	7.6	9.0	8.0	8.6
Cornwall	8.6	8.3	8.11	8.9	8.8
Somerset	7.3	8.2	8.6	8.8	8.7
Southwestern Average	7.10	7.8	8.9	8.2	8.1
Index number	100	99	112	104	103
Gloucester	7.0	9.3	9.6	9.0	7.0
Hereford	8.0	7.0	8.1	8.0	8.5
Salop	7.6	8.10	9.2	9.0	7.3
Stafford	7.6	10.7	11.1	12.0	9.6
Worcester	8.6	8.2	9.6	9.6	7.8
Warwick	7.6	8.10	10.10	10.0	8.6
West Midlands Average	7.8	8.9	9.8	9.7	8.1
Index number	100	115	126	124	107

APPENDIX D (Continued)

Counties	1795	1824	1833	1837	1850
Leicester	11.0	9.10	11.2	10.0	9.6
Rutland	9.0	—	12.2	—	—
Lincoln	10.6	10.2	12.4	12.0	10.0
Notts	9.0	10.3	12.10	12.0	10.0
Derby	9.3	10.10	12.0	12.0	11.0
North Midlands Average	9.9	10.3	12.3	11.6	10.1
Index number	100	106	127	120	105
Chester	9.0	10.8	9.10	13.0	12.0
Lancashire	13.6	12.5	12.2	12.8	13.6
York, W. R.	11.0	12.5	11.5	12.0	14.0
York, E. R.	11.3	11.8	11.0	12.0	12.0
York, N. R.	10.0	10.3	11.4	12.0	11.0
Durham	9.0	11.6	11.0	12.0	11.0
Northumberland	10.6	11.5	11.5	12.0	11.0
Cumberland	9.0	12.2	10.8	12.0	13.0
Westmoreland	10.0	12.0	11.0	12.0	12.0
Northern Average	10.4	11.7	11.1	12.2	12.2
Index number	100	113	105	118	118
Monmouth	9.0	10.0	10.8	10.6	19.8
Wales	6.8	8.0	8.2	7.6	6.11
General Average	8.11	9.7	10.8	10.3	9.6
Index number	100	108	120	115	108

Sources: The data are drawn from A. I. Bowley, "The Statistics of Wages in the United Kingdom During the Last Hundred Years. Agricultural Wages," *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* (Dec. 1898). The 1795 figures are derived from Eden and Young; the 1824 figures come from the same committee which circulated the questionnaire on the allowance system; the 1833 and 1837 figures rest on returns from about 1,000 parishes collected by the Poor Law Commissioners; the 1851 figures are given by Caird. All of these represent the average of summer and winter wages; in those counties where free board or lodging was general, they include such payments in kind. The averages for the districts are simple arithmetic averages because no adequate weights were obtainable. Bowley's index numbers, based on 1892, have been reduced to 1795.

Slightly different figures, based on other authorities, are presented in A. L. Bowley, *Wages in the Nineteenth Century* (1900), chs. 4-5, but the differences are negligible. These are reprinted in Lord Ernle, *English Farming*, Appendix IX, with comparable data down to 1926, giving an overview of trends throughout the whole of the nineteenth century.

After due reflection, Bowley concluded that index numbers found for wages can be adopted for earnings without alteration. See his article "The Statistics of Wages in the United Kingdom During the Last Hundred Years. Earnings and General Averages," *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* (Sept. 1889), and his *Wages in the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 41-43. For a more skeptical view see O. R. McGregor, "Introduction, Pt. 2: After 1815," to Lord Ernle, *English Farming*, pp. cxix-cxxi.

APPENDIX E

INDEX OF WEEKLY EARNINGS OF AGRICULTURAL
WORKERS, BY COUNTIES (1795 = 100)

<i>Spenehamland Counties</i>	1824	1833	1837	1850
Sussex	94	121	104	102
Bucks	105	130	120	105
Wilts	90	111	95	87
Beds	113	141	126	120
Berks	96	114	112	83
Hunts	88	139	112	100
Suffolk	80	90	99	80
Norfolk	101	120	113	93
Dorset	86	109	94	94
Essex	112	123	123	91
Cambridge	110	130	120	110
Oxford	96	121	103	107
Northants	114	150	128	128
Leicester	87	108	87	85
Warwick	120	145	132	115
Devon	108	130	111	123
Notts	115	141	133	110
York, E. R.	122	122	125	125
York, N. R.	103	112	120	109
Average	100	124	106	104
<i>Non-Spenehamland Counties</i>				
Kent	112	126	115	109
Hants	86	104	92	90
Surrey	101	117	100	90
Herts	113	142	120	113
Worcester	96	120	111	90
Rutland	—	140	—	—
Hereford	88	111	112	105
Lincoln	99	138	115	96
Somerset	112	121	120	119
Gloucester	133	140	115	100
York, W. R.	107	111	101	124
Stafford	143	151	159	125
Chester	118	108	145	133
Cornwall	97	106	103	102
Derby	116	124	130	120
Durham	144	148	150	138
Salop	96	130	118	92
Northumberland	108	107	113	106
Cumberland	135	130	145	156
Westmoreland	122	108	122	122
Lancaster	99	98	98	106
Middlesex	124	165	173	123
Monmouth	111	116	116	108
Wales	120	122	112	105
Average for England and Wales	108	120	115	108