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Beyond Enclosure: the role of estate management in transforming the Corbet Estates in North Shropshire, 1740-1840

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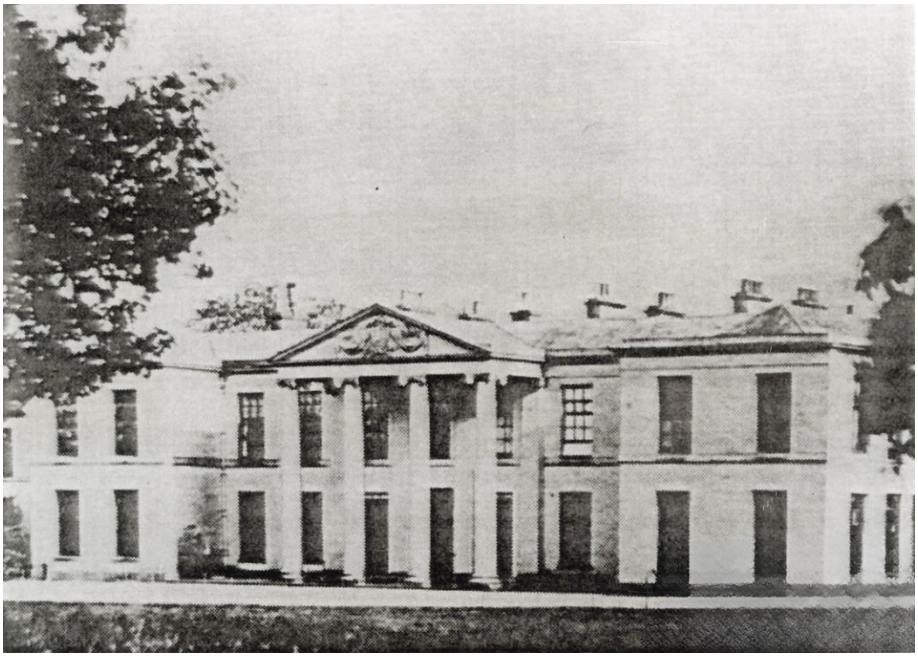


Photograph of the first Adderley Hall built c. 1750, Adderley Heritage, https://adderleyheritage.co.uk/collection/photo-adderley-hall/.

Abstract

The cause of England's agricultural transformation and subsequent escape from Malthusian constraints remains a subject of significant debate in economic and agricultural historiography. This study challenges conventional narratives by examining the Corbet estates in old-enclosed Shropshire between 1740 and 1840 to assess whether shifts associated with 'agricultural revolution', such as farm engrossment and rising rents, emerged in the absence of parliamentary enclosure. By considering an area where traditional views on parliamentary enclosure are less applicable, this research provides a nuanced understanding of agricultural shifts in a regional context. Using the Corbet family rentals and estate surveys, this study tracks changes in land distribution, tenure security, and rents over the period. This is then combined with a thorough analysis of parish records and contemporary accounts to consider the motivations behind the observed shifts. Such a multifaceted approach aims to determine whether these shifts can be attributed to productivity growth, as traditional narratives suggest, or whether deliberate estate management decisions played a more significant role. The results indicate that an agricultural transformation was occurring on the Corbet estates, but that there is little evidence to suggest a link to productivity growth. Therefore, it is likely that the estate

management philosophy of the Corbet family, particularly following their descent into debt after 1783, was a central driver of the observed shifts. Ultimately, this research provides insight into how rural transformation operated across diverse regional contexts in the Early Modern period, challenging traditional narratives that are centred around enclosure.

1. Introduction

During the Early Modern period, English rural society experienced a profound social and economic transformation. Historians have uncovered substantial increases in agricultural productivity, significant changes to landholding, and a fivefold rise in the English population, indicating a clear escape from the Malthusian checks and balances that had plagued prior centuries. This transformation has come to be known as the 'agricultural revolution'. The idea of a single 'revolution' is an idea first devised by Arnold Toynbee, who wrote of an 'agrarian revolution' broadly coinciding with the growth of industry.[1] This traditional view emphasises the role of institutional shifts after 1750, such as parliamentary enclosure, in promoting productivity growth and farm engrossment. Revisionists have subsequently extended this timeline to cover a much earlier section of English history, with the identification of several 'critical' periods between 1560 and 1850. Toynbee's definition of an 'agrarian revolution' has been simultaneously narrowed to focus solely on 'agricultural' technological innovation, rather than the broader agrarian shifts that characterise contemporary narratives. Thus, we encounter the 'agricultural revolution' as we know it today. The question of when and precisely how it occurred (alongside its geographical nuance) remains contested – a broad inquiry that this study seeks to address.

The process of enclosure poses a controversial topic within historiographical debate, deemed a central driver to agrarian progress by the traditionalists but subsequently dismissed as inconsequential by revisionist arguments. Despite

[1] Arnold Toynbee, *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution in England*, (1884; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

this disagreement, few studies have attempted to isolate the impacts of parliamentary enclosure on agricultural transformation. Similarly, little attention has been paid to the old-enclosed counties of England although there is ample evidence to suggest that they experienced similar rural transformations to those that were enclosed after 1750. This research gap is particularly significant, as it is estimated that 45% of English land had been enclosed by 1500.[2] In an attempt to address this missing piece, this study considers the old-enclosed county of Shropshire to evaluate whether agricultural revolution was able to occur in the absence of parliamentary enclosure. Once this objective has been achieved, a thorough examination of the motivations behind such a transformation will be conducted with a particular focus on the alternative explanation of estate management decisions as an overlooked driver of agricultural change between 1740 and 1840.

The Corbet estates in North Shropshire provide a valuable case study to assess these dynamics. The period of 1740 to 1840 was notably turbulent for the Corbet family, as they experienced an era of instability following the successive deaths of two lords and subsequent fragmentation of the estate amongst the six remaining Corbet sisters. Ultimately ownership was consolidated in the hands of Sir Corbet Corbet (commonly referred to as 'Corbet' within this study) in 1783, which broadly coincided with the appointment of a new land agent and a significant increase in rents. Such a natural experiment allows for the isolation of the effects of estate management decisions from broader market considerations. It must, however, be noted that these events occurred immediately prior to a period of significant upheaval for the agricultural sector due to the Napoleonic wars.

The multifaceted approach of this study offers significant nuance. By collecting data from the Corbet family rentals and estate surveys alongside the Adderley and Drayton parish registers, it becomes possible to track changes to land

[2] "A Brief History of Enclosures," Cliff Cobb, accessed May 6, 2025, https://www.cooperative-individualism.org/cobb-clifford_a-brief-history-of-enclosures-2003.htm.

distribution, the security of tenure, and rents around the accession of the new lord. Hence this study can viably assess whether the shifts associated with the agricultural revolution, such as farm engrossment and rising rents, emerged in Shropshire in absence of parliamentary enclosure. Similarly, an assessment of contemporary accounts and correspondence offers an insight into the personal situation of the Corbet family, therefore indicating potential drivers of the observed transformations. Ultimately, the combination of these methods will allow for a thorough understanding of if, how, and why the Corbet estate changed in the absence of enclosure – were these shifts driven by productivity growth as the traditionalists suggest or did the estate management decisions of the landlord play a crucial role? Understanding these dynamics not only challenges conventional narratives of enclosure as central to the agricultural revolution but also provides insight into how rural transformation operated across diverse regional contexts in the Early Modern period.

2. Background

2.1 The Corbets of Adderley

The Corbets of Adderley were prominent members of the English landed gentry. Descended from the Corbets of Moreton Corbet, the Adderley line came into possession of their vast North Shropshire estates through the marriage of Reginald Corbet to Alice Gratewood in 1546, and by 1627 the family had been created Baronets of Stoke Upon Tern.[3] The period of focus for this study (1740-1840) marks a tumultuous time in Corbet history, with the premature deaths of two lords in quick succession and subsequent 30-year period of fragmented power as the six sisters of the previous lords inherited equal shares of the estate. Land was eventually consolidated in the hands of Sir Corbet Corbet (né Corbet D'Avenant) following the deaths of his mother and aunts by 1783.[4] Following Corbet's death in 1823, the estate came into the control of a group of trustees

[3] "A Brief History of the Corbets of Adderley," *Adderley Heritage Trail*, accessed March 22, 2025, https://adderleyheritage.co.uk/story/brief-history-of-the-corbets-of-adderley/

[4] *Mr Hodgson's opinion on Sir Corbet's title*, 1808, 327/2/1/1/25, Corbet of Adderley Family and Estate Records, Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury.

(appointed by the late lord) who managed the estate for the remainder of the period.

2.2 Aristocratic Consumption in Context

Aristocratic culture in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was built upon the idea of conspicuous consumption, or the purchase of extravagant goods to display superior wealth, taste, and education.[5] This was intended to protect the elite identity and differentiate aristocratic families from those of a lesser social standing. Central to this process was the country house, built upon the estate of a wealthy landowner and used as a genteel retreat from the busy London season. Although ownership of a country house was seen as 'the most proper and visible distinction of riches', the manner in which one engaged with the space was equally significant, leading Jon Stobart to describe the institution as 'both an object and a nexus of consumption'.[6] After expending enormous, and occasionally 'ruinous', sums on the building of their vast manors, aristocratic families were expected to outfit them with the most extravagant luxuries – such as Old Master paintings, silver tea sets, and flocks of liveried servants – to allow them to partake in the 'polite and virtuous sociability' that distinguished the elite from the rest of the populace.[7] This required significant expenditure, with one prominent landowner, Sir Roger Newdigate, spending as much on liveries as he did on clothing for himself and his wife.[8] To afford these 'basic minimums', an income of at least £5000 to £6000 per annum is thought to have been required, although a comfortable living may have cost as much as £10,000 per annum.[9] Whilst considered a great landowner by historian G.E. Mingay's definition of assets, Sir Corbet Corbet failed to meet the associated income requirements for

[5] Jon Stobart and Mark Rothery, *Consumption and the Country House*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 16.
[6] Christopher Christie, "The Country House and Money," in *The British Country House in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Christopher Christie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 18; Jon Stobart, "Introduction: Travel and the British Country House," in *Travel and the British Country* House, ed. Jon Stobart (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 14.
[7] Stobart and Rothery, *Consumption*, 3, 49.
[8] Stobart and Rothery, *Consumption*, 39.
[9] G.E Mingay, *English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 10.

more than a decade following his inheritance, despite continual recorded engagement with such luxuries.[10]

The Grand Tour reinforced this culture of conspicuous consumption, providing aristocrats with the opportunity to furnish their country houses with prestigious artwork and antiquities collected from across Europe. Its significance was twofold: the well-travelled gentleman demonstrated wealth and cultural sophistication whilst showcasing a superior education that allowed him to approach classical antiquity, and the narratives found within his artefacts, with ease and familiarity.[11] Sir Corbet Corbet was one such figure with a long residence in Rome and a keen interest in archaeology, as evidenced by his participation in several excavations – most notably the famed 1794 discovery of the 'Campo Iemini Venus', currently on display in the British Museum.[12] During his time in Italy, Corbet maintained close relationships with many prominent artists, including Robert Fagan and John Deare, from whom he made several recorded purchases. Most notable was the purchase of a bas-relief sculpture in 1792 for the price of £120, or 3% of his annual income, and the commission of a portrait by Robert Fagan (Figure 1) depicting Corbet with his wife, Hester, lounging in front of an ancient Roman landscape – apparent symbols of the couple's grandeur and connection to classical Italy. [13]

[10] G.E Mingay, *English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 10.
Stobart and Rothery, *Consumption*, 50.
[12] Ilaria Bignamini, "The 'Campo Iemini Venus' Rediscovered," *The Burlington Magazine* 136, no. 1097, (August 1994), 548.
[13] John Thomas Smith, *Nollekens and his Times*, (London: Henry Colburn, 1828), 324; Robert Fagan, c. 1792, oil on canvas, 263.3 x 195.6cm, Christie's, https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-5702475.

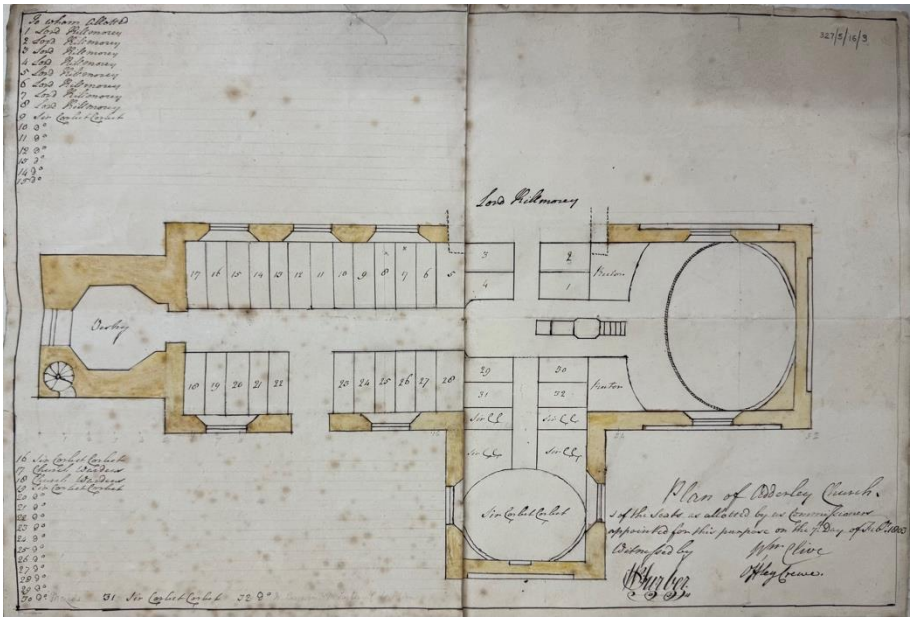
Figure 1 – A Portrait of Sir Corbet Corbet and His Wife, Hester[14]

These grand displays may have become particularly important for Corbet due to a growing disconnect between his status as a substantial landowner and his exclusion from the peerage.[15] Although the traditional Corbet title of Baronet of Stoke upon Tern was recreated on the inheritance of his vast estates, a baronetcy was the lowest title within the ranks of the social elite. Thus, Corbet remained a commoner and would have been denied access to the more exclusive social luxuries enjoyed by peers, such as a seat in the House of Lords. This was a stark contrast to other prominent Shropshire families, such as the Leveson-Gowers who were raised from baronets to the Dukes of Sutherland in just over a century.[16] Similarly, the Needham family were raised from viscounts to the Earls of Kilmorey in Corbet's lifetime. The Needhams were natural rivals to the Corbets due to the close proximity of their estate, Shavington, to Adderley Hall.

[14] Robert Fagan, c. 1792, oil on canvas, 263.3 x 195.6cm, Christie's, https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-5702475*;* Commonly misidentified as Andrew Corbet. Identification here reflects Corbet Corbet's confirmed presence in Rome, his documented connection to Fagan, and the identification of the sitter as Hester, his wife.
[15] A great estate (according to G.E. Mingay) produced more than £5,000 in income per year by 1800, Sir Corbet Corbet's estates brought in over £10,000 in 1799; G.E Mingay, *English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 10.
[16] J. R. Wordie, "Social Change on the Leveson-Gower Estates, 1714-1832" *The Economic History Review* 27, no.4 (1974), 595.

The longstanding tension between the families is evidenced in Figure 3, showing a plan of Adderley Church with individual pews for Lord Kilmorey and Sir Corbet Corbet. Despite being completed in 1637, the Needham pew remained unused until the close of the 18th century due to Corbet protests and the unwillingness of the churchwardens to overrule their patrons.[17] The disagreements between the families devolved into threats of violence and several occupations of the church with an armed guard – this hostility grew so severe that the church was desecrated and services had to briefly cease.[18] Such local rivalries had the potential to drive Corbet into larger displays of wealth, as the need to maintain appearances grew in the face of high-status neighbours.

Figure 2 – A Plan of Adderley Church (1803)[19]



Engagement with conspicuous consumption often led aristocrats to live well beyond their means. David Cannadine writes of aristocratic debt in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, finding that, as a whole, the aristocracy

[17] "St Peter's Church Adderley Shropshire," Michael Charlesworth, accessed May 4, 2025, https://adderleyparish.co.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/ST-PETERS-church.pdf.
[18] *The Battle for a Pew*, Geoff Butter Collection, Adderley Heritage, Shropshire, https://adderleyheritage.co.uk/collection/cuttings-the-battle-for-a-pew/.
[19] *Plan of Adderley Church*, 1803, 327/5/16/3, Corbet of Adderley Family and Estate Records, Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury.

was deeply indebted. Cannadine emphasises the impact of conspicuous consumption on family expenditure, acknowledging that such a need for display caused families to habitually exceed their income. Corbet's situation often exemplifies this trend, as his expenditure on luxuries, such as his purchase of a £120 bas-relief, demonstrates. Similarly revealing are contemporary accounts, including an 1820 letter from land agent William Furber to a prominent tenant responding to complaints about increased rent, explicitly stating that all money collected is to be provided to the lord 'exclusive of the debt for which he is now in'.[20] There is also evidence that Corbet intended to mortgage the estate to raise funds, with the creation of an 'opinion of title' by lawyer John Hodgson, addressed to potential mortgagees of the Corbet estate and referencing an imminent estate sale in September 1808.[21] These indicate that Corbet had found himself encumbered by debt and was taking steps to service it. Ultimately, despite failing to meet a minimum income threshold for comfortable aristocratic living, Sir Corbet Corbet continued to invest heavily in luxury and status symbols, clearly prioritising the appearance of wealth over financial sustainability.

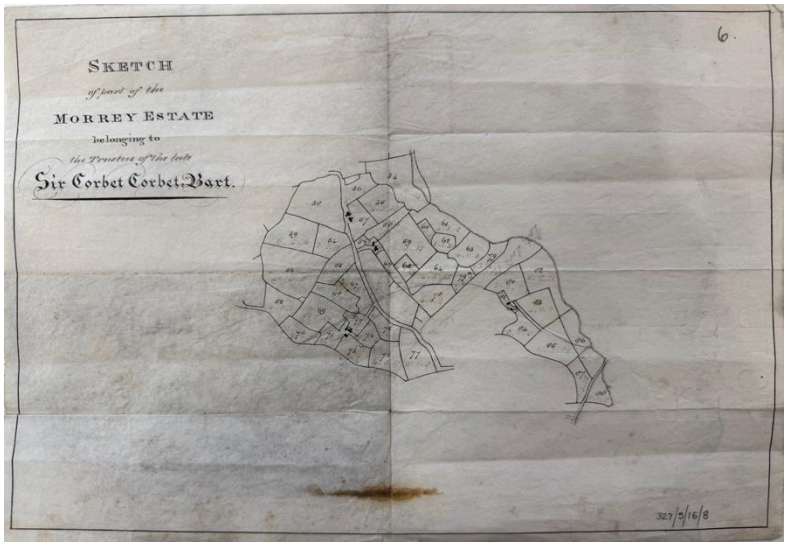
2.3 Estate Structure and Land Distribution

The lands studied are a part of the estate of the Corbets of Adderley, lying within the manors of Adderley and Drayton, located in the Northeast of the county of Shropshire spanning 3200 and 1900 acres respectively.[22] A 1787 survey indicates that the bulk of land within the Adderley estate was rented in large parcels, averaging 50 acres each, although 47% of tenants farmed plots spanning less than 5 acres. In contrast, the average land-occupying tenant on the Drayton estate farmed 11 acres and 38% rented no land at all.[23] This is due to the Drayton estate's large stock of wasteland (800 acres), and the position of much of

[20] *William Furber's letter books*, 1818-1824, 327/5/5/2, Corbet of Adderley Family and Estate Records, Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury.
[21] *Mr Hodgson's opinion on Sir Corbet's title*, 1808, 327/2/1/1/25, Corbet of Adderley Family and Estate Records, Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury.
[22] *Estate Survey*, 1787, 327/5/2/1/2, Corbet of Adderley Family and Estate Records, Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury.
[23] Ibid.

its property in the centre of the modern-day town of Market Drayton, naturally skewing land usage towards residential rentals rather than agricultural. It is important to note that the Shropshire landscape was largely enclosed by the 16th century, hence this land continued unchanged during the era of parliamentary enclosure. The only indication of such a shift is 15 acres of new enclosure mentioned in the 1787 survey, although the overall proportion of land enclosed in Shropshire during this period did reach 7.5% and, as such, was not entirely insignificant.[24]

Figure 3: A Sketch of Part of the Morrey Estate in the Parish of Adderley (c.1830)[25]



3. Historiographical Context

3.1 Debates on the Agricultural Revolution

Popularised by Toynbee in his 1880 *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution*, the existence of a so-called 'agricultural revolution' (broadly defined as a period of significant agricultural advancement) during the Early Modern era has become

[24] "Definitions of Historic Landscape Types," Shropshire Council, accessed March 15, 2025, https://www.shropshire.gov.uk/media/1797/table-5-current-hlc-type-definitions.pdf
[25] The Morrey is a township in the parish of Adderley and was part of the Adderley estate; *Sketch – part of the Morrey* Estate, c. 1823, 327/5/16/8, Corbet of Adderley Family and Estate Records, Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury.

one of the most highly debated topics within agricultural history.[26] The existence of this 'revolution' is widely accepted as, between 1600 and 1900, the population of England and Wales grew from 4.5 million to over 30 million.[27] This is a clear sign of escape from traditional Malthusian constraints on population growth and indicates significant technological and institutional shifts during the period, hence the consensus amongst historians as to its occurrence. The debate instead focuses on the timing and nature of this 'revolutionary' change with three periods of interest emerging in the literature: 1560 to 1673, 1650 to 1750, and 1750 to 1850.[28]

The traditional interpretation, devised by Arnold Toynbee and Lord Ernle, proposes an 'agrarian revolution' occurring in the century following 1750.[29] This was largely based upon the works of contemporary Arthur Young who believed strongly in the processes of enclosure and farm amalgamation to stimulate growth in agriculture.[30] The argument advanced by Toynbee and Ernle was that enclosure facilitated the rise of agricultural innovations, such as the Norfolk four-course crop rotation, that were vital to agricultural productivity growth after 1750.[31] This method allowed farmers to eliminate fallow periods and increase land fertility with a strategic rotation of crops, thus theoretically raising

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[26] Arnold Toynbee, *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution in England*, (1884; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
[27]Anthony E. Wrigley, "Rickman revisited: The Population Growth Rates of English Counties in the Early Modern Period." *The Economic History Review* 62, no. 3 (2009): 715; Anthony E. Wrigley "The Growth of Population in Eighteenth-Century England: A Conundrum Resolved." *Past & Present*, no. 98 (1983): 122.
[28] Arnold Toynbee, *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution in England*, (1884; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Rowland Prothero, *English Farming Past and Present*, (London: Longman's, Green, and Co, 1912); J. D. Chambers and G. E. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution, 1750-1880*, (London: William Clowes & Sons Ltd, 1966); Eric Kerridge, *The Agricultural Revolution*, (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1967); Mark Overton, "Re-Establishing the English Agricultural Revolution," *The Agricultural History Review* 44, no. 1 (1996): 1-20; Robert Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
[29] Arnold Toynbee, *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution in England*, (1884; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Rowland Prothero, *English Farming Past and Present*, (London: Longman's, Green, and Co, 1912).
[30] Arthur Young and G. E. Mingay, *Arthur Young and His Times*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1975).
[31] Rowland Prothero, *English Farming Past and Present*, (London: Longman's, Green, and Co, 1912), 134; Arnold Toynbee, *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution in England*, (1884; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 41.

yields of both food and fodder.[32] Despite placing the introduction of this particular crop rotation firmly in the 17th century, both rejected the idea that it was immediately revolutionary, with Ernle writing that farmer of the early 18th century 'lived, thought, and farmed' just as they had in the 13th century.[33] They instead present enclosure as a catalyst for the spread of the Norfolk four-course, alleging that common field farmers were unable or unwilling to implement new methods. This mirrors Young's view that despite the high quality of common land, its free use led to careless farmers producing 'miserable crops'.[34]

Gordon Mingay and Jonathan Chambers provide a more nuanced interpretation of a post-1750 revolution, minimising the impacts of enclosure and instead highlighting technological innovation and farm engrossment as key drivers of modernisation.[35] They contend that the agricultural changes often referred to as the 'revolution' had been underway as early as the middle-ages, gradually reaching their 'maturity' by the 19th century.[36] In many ways their arguments mirror that of Toynbee and Ernle, although rather than enclosure they cite modern drainage systems as enabling the diffusion of earlier advances. According to Mingay and Chambers, such changes, alongside the gradual process of farm engrossment, were integral to the shift towards commercial farming. Although this shift had been fully realised by the late 19th century, they emphasise that it had a much longer history.

Prominent revisionist Eric Kerridge rejects Toynbee's notion of an *agrarian* revolution, instead characterising his chosen period of 1560 to 1673 as one of *agricultural* revolution – a much narrower definition that focuses solely on the innovation of farming techniques and disregards institutional change. Kerridge

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[32] Oliver G. Knox et al, "Revisiting the Multiple Benefits of Historical Crop Rotations within Contemporary UK Agricultural Systems," *Journal of Sustainable Agriculture* 35, no. 2 (2011): 169.
[33] Rowland Prothero, *English Farming Past and Present*, (London: Longman's, Green, and Co, 1912), 220.
[34] Arthur Young, *A Six Months Tour Through the North of England*, (London: W. Strahan, 1771), 340-341.
[35] J. D. Chambers and G. E. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution, 1750-1880*, (London: William Clowes & Sons Ltd, 1966).
[36] Ibid, 199.

presents convertible husbandry and changes to land use as the 'backbone' of agricultural modernisation, a state he believes that England had reached prior to 1750.[37] However, he places these innovations in the 17th century and unlike Toynbee and Ernle, does not consider their speed of dissemination or feasibility in differing climates. Whilst he rejects almost every claim of the traditionalists as 'fictitious' or 'over-rated', though offering little evidence, he accepts Chambers and Mingay's perspective on the importance of drainage innovations in the 18th and 19th centuries.[38] His acknowledgement of later innovations is inconsistent with his complete rejection of the traditional view and raises the question of whether his period of 1560 to 1673 fully encompasses the process of 'agricultural revolution'. Kerridge finds some support in the works of E. L. Jones who places the agricultural revolution at some point between 1650 and 1750, although unlike Kerridge he believes that the innovations he ascribes to the period had 'much ground to conquer' as late as 1750. [39]

Mark Overton presents a nuanced counter-revisionist perspective by dividing the process into two distinct transformations: first in output and second within the institutional framework of farming.[40] Through this lens, Overton reaffirms the narrative advanced by Chambers and Mingay, arguing that although there is evidence of early innovation in farming, the adoption of new methods occurred gradually, gaining significant momentum after 1750.[41] Conversely, Overton parallels Kerridge in asserting that enclosure and engrossment were independent processes that were frequently, but not necessarily, connected. Unlike the traditionalists who view rising rents as an indicator of productivity, Overton contends that these values reflect a redistribution of profits from tenants to landlords, resulting from increasing economic pressures and a 'power struggle' between the groups, rather than being a representation of land

[37] Eric Kerridge, *The Agricultural Revolution*, (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1967), 181.
[38] Ibid, 37.
[39] E. L. Jones, "Agriculture and Economic Growth in England, 1660-1750: Agricultural Change," *The Journal of Economic History* 25, no. 1 (1965): 4.
[40] Mark Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 193.
[41] Ibid, 197.

productivity.[42] Ultimately, Overton upholds traditional perspectives by highlighting how market integration and the spread of innovation after 1750 drove the agricultural revolution, whilst also emphasising that enclosure 'accelerated the process dramatically'.[43]

Robert Allen rejects Overton's claims of productivity growth post-1750, demonstrating that Overton was inadvertently tracking population growth by assuming constant per capita food consumption.[44] Despite this, Allen maintains a similar periodisation of Early Modern agricultural development.[45] His first period (1520-1739) documents a doubling of farm production, lending empirical support to the assertions of both Kerridge and Jones, although it extends beyond Kerridge's 1673 endpoint.[46] Allen terms this the 'yeoman's revolution' and argues that security of tenure and the prevalence of the smallholder encouraged meaningful productivity gains and substantial investment in agriculture.[47] The second period (1740-1800) encompasses the era of parliamentary enclosure and remarkably reclassifies it as a period of stagnation, despite observing farm engrossment, enclosure, and increases to rent.[48] This phase, aptly named the 'landlord's revolution', aligns with Overton's period of institutional change.[49] Allen found that during this period, increases to rent bore little relation to productivity gains and instead reflected a significant redistribution in profits from tenants to landlords, concluding that 'all the income gains from the agricultural revolution accrued to landowners'. Despite their disagreement as to the level of productivity growth, Allen and Overton both propel the view of institutional change after 1750 as a redistributive force, directly challenging

[42] Ibid, 162.
[43] Mark Overton, "Re-Establishing the Agricultural Revolution," *The Agricultural History Review* 44, no.1 (1996): 20.
[44] Robert Allen, "Tracking the Agricultural Revolution in England," *The Economic History Review* 52, no. 2 (1999): 212.
[45] Ibid, 215.
[46] Ibid, 216.
[47] Robert Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 310.
[48] Robert Allen, "Tracking the Agricultural Revolution in England," *The Economic History Review* 52, no. 2 (1999): 216.
[49] Robert Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 310.

traditional narratives that associate agrarian change with agricultural progress.[50]

3.2 Land Tenure and The Size of Farms

The manorial estate of the early modern period was a vital institution that played a complex role in shaping rural society. By the close of the 18th century, 80% to 90% of English farmland was cultivated by tenant farmers who were reliant on the manorial lord for their livelihood.[51] Traditionally, most of this land was held under 'customary tenure', meaning that the conditions of tenancy differed between manors. This was often in the form of copyhold, which involved a high entry fine and low annual rents that were unrelated to the value of the land.[52] These contracts were often inherited across generations, providing tenants with security similar to that of a freehold. Historians agree that from the 17th century, these secure tenancies began to be replaced by leaseholds, and eventually tenancies-at-will. Leaseholds were typically long-term arrangements with fixed rents, whilst tenancies-at-will lacked written agreements and thus offered no formal protection.[53] Many argue that landlords began this process to shift land away from small farmers. Allen, for example, believes that landlords could charge a higher rent per acre to larger farms, although Clark contests this, finding that rent per acre declined steadily as farm size increased.[54] With opposing views as to the benefits of the substantial tenant to the landlord, some minor debate remains within agricultural history concerning patterns of landholding within the manor.

J. R. Wordie's study of the Levenson-Gower estates has proven vital to understanding such patterns across the 18th century. He emphasises the

[50] Robert Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 311.
[51] Avner Offer, "Farm Tenure and Land Values in England, c. 1750-1950," *The Economic History Review* 44, no. 1 (1991): 1.
[52] Gregory Clark, "Land Rental Values and the Agrarian Economy: England and Wales, 1500-1914," *European Review of Economic History* 6, no. 3 (2002): 281.
[53] Ibid, 281.
[54] Robert Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 214; Gregory Clark, "Too Much Revolution: Agriculture in the Industrial Revolution," in *The British Industrial Revolution*, ed. Joel Mokyr, (London: Routledge, 1999), 226.

importance of regional studies, such as this, in revealing various aspects of the process of agricultural revolution – something that many writers have neglected.[55] Wordie presents an interesting view, finding that holdings of under 20 acres were growing in number alongside that of large farms. He believes that this signalled the end of the 'middling farmer' (with holdings of 20 to 200 acres) as, unlike the smallholder, they were unable to supplement their income with wage labour.[56] Wordie contends that this was the beginning of a socially divisive and fragmented rural society, with a deep divide emerging between the labouring smallholder and the substantial tenant farmer.[57] G. E. Mingay similarly concludes that the traditional view of a decline in smallholding has been greatly exaggerated.[58] He writes that landlords found it difficult to find tenants for large farms and were consequently reluctant to consolidate land unless it fell vacant.[59] Mingay ultimately believes that estate management practices helped to maintain relatively stable farm sizes throughout the 18th century, with shifts to landholding occurring over periods of 50 years or more.[60] While he acknowledges a slight trend towards larger farms, he attributes this shift more to inheritance and marriage rather than intentional decisions by the landlord.[61]

4. Research Design

4.1 Methodological Approaches

The primary objective of this paper is to assess how estate management practices contributed to agricultural progress in the absence of enclosure. This study addresses three key themes. First, I analyse land distribution patterns within the manor across the period 1740 to 1840. This spatial analysis not only reveals

[55] J. R. Wordie, "Social Change on the Leveson-Gower Estates, 1714-1832," *The Economic History Review* 27, no.4 (1974), 593.
[56] Ibid, 602.
[57] Ibid, 604.
[58] G. E. Mingay, "The Size of Farms in the Eighteenth Century," *The Economic History* Review 14, no. 3 (1962): 469.
[59] Ibid, 475.
[60] Ibid, 477.
[61] Ibid, 479.

information on the concentration of land but also offers an insight into the emergence of increased social stratification in rural communities. Secondly, I employ data on tenure type to assess the security of tenure on the Corbet estates. When combined with information from parish registers and data on tenant holdings, I will be able to produce a qualitative examination of family persistence and inheritance patterns across generations. The aim of this is to contextualise the process of farm engrossment that has been documented within the literature – was this occurring through inheritance or were landlords evicting long-term tenants in favour of the substantial farmer? The final theme is an evaluation of temporal rent patterns. This was undertaken to shed light on the reasoning behind the above changes, for example, if small farmers paid lower rents per acre, then landlords may have been incentivised to evict small tenants and engross farms.

There exists a wealth of manorial records, dating as early as the 12th century, that remain underutilised in the literature on Early Modern agriculture. This study intends to engage with Shropshire records of estate management, in particular the rentals and surveys of the Corbet estate, to build an understanding of the social and economic structures that underpinned rural life between 1740 and 1840. Using a systematic sampling method, I constructed an original dataset from the Corbet rent books, selecting every 5th year, and capturing information on approximately 260 tenants annually. I collected data on rent payments and property types to track temporal shifts. Estate surveys allowed me to connect this information to farm sizes, providing insight into rent per acre and the distribution of landholding. Finally, by integrating this dataset with a detailed analysis of parish registers, I was able to track the tenure and inheritance of families over time.

5. Primary Source Discussion

5.1 Estate Rentals and Surveys

The primary sources employed within this study were the Corbet family rentals and estate surveys for the manors of Adderley and Drayton between 1740 and 1840, accessed at the Shropshire Archives in Shrewsbury.[62] Created under the supervision of land agents Thomas Whilton (unknown-1787) and William Furber (1787-1823), these were a set of administrative accounts bound in paper volumes. The rentals were created annually and contained information on all manors comprising the Corbet estate (Adderley, Drayton, Stoke, Child's Ercall, and Hinstock). The surveys appear to have been commissioned for specific administrative purposes – in 1787 due to Corbet's inheritance and in 1807 just prior to an estate sale – and as such do not exist in a consistent chronological sequence. The choice to focus this study solely on the manors of Adderley and Drayton was intentional – they were the largest Corbet holdings and offered an intriguing contrast between the well-populated, urban setting of Drayton and the rural nature of Adderley.

Although the temporal breadth of the Corbet records provides valuable insight into the transformation of the estate, the shift in land agents indicated above must be considered to account for bias. As the preservation of estate management documents depends largely on the quality of the land agent, there is potential for survivorship bias to exist within remaining manorial records. This is because agents who were committed to maintaining thorough records likely demonstrated a stronger orientation towards business practices. Hence, it is vital to note that surviving records, such as those on the Corbet estate, may overstate the prevalence of strong estate management philosophies across England. The lack of documentation from the time of Thomas Whilton indicates that this bias could be present. Despite this, the remaining records offer rich insight into the inner workings of manorial institutions, with data on rent

[62] *Surveys of the estates of Sir Corbet Corbet in Adderley and Drayton, 1787 and 1807*, 327/5/2/1/2 and 327/5/2/1/6, Corbet of Adderley Family and Estate Records, Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury; Corbet estate rentals (1740-1840), 327/5/4/1/228-358, Corbet of Adderley Family and Estate Records, Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury.

payments, arrears, farm sizes, and tenancy type for each tenant. This allowed me to produce an original dataset collating longitudinal data on these variables between the years of 1740 and 1840.

The primary issue with the use of manorial records for this study lies with how different systems of tenure can obscure true rental values. During earlier periods, copyhold and lifeleashold were the predominant forms of tenure. Both included a large entry fine and a nominal annual rent payment that was unrelated to the value of land. These were eventually replaced by leases for years and tenancies-at-will and rents began to reflect market values more accurately, offering better insights into farm profitability and movements in the rental market. This complicates long-term analysis of rental values as increases may simply reflect shifts in tenure. To address this challenge, I analysed estate surveys to examine tenure distributions across the manors and track changes between 1787 and 1807. This revealed that whilst leaseholds and copyhold for lives existed, these arrangements were primarily used for residential tenures, with agricultural land predominantly falling under tenancy-at-will agreements as early as 1787. Additionally, it was found that the rents of residential properties held under lifeleashold increased at broadly the same rate as those held under tenancies-at-will.

Furthermore, there are some issues with the consistency of the existing records. I set out to transcribe the rental records every 5 years for the entire 100-year period, and although this was largely a success, I was unable to collect any data between the years of 1810 and 1822. This was a significant period in English agricultural history, offering both a peak and depression in corn prices due to the end of the Napoleonic wars. The records I transcribed for 1810 and 1822 seem to capture the general upward trend, but it is possible that the dataset overlooks a more extreme fluctuation in rental values by assuming linearity between these years.

5.2 Parish Registers

I also employed primary sources in the form of parish registers from the parishes of Drayton-in-Hales and Adderley, which contain a record of all baptisms, marriages, and burials. These were valuable in tracing family relations to understand typical inheritance customs amongst tenants. There were a few difficulties in interpreting these, including the fact that they recorded *baptisms* and *burials* rather than births and deaths and, prior to the 1750s, records were kept according to the Julian calendar rather than Gregorian. This created some concerns for tracking families across time but was not hugely significant to the primary aim of the exercise, which was to create a broad understanding of family structures. More notably was the existence of multiple individuals with the same name and missing records within the register, perhaps due to movements between parishes. An example of this is within the prominent Blantern family – I was unable to ascertain the inheritance of Robert Blantern Jr. with certainty, as the parish register was missing notice of the burial of his father, who also went by Robert. Ultimately these challenges do not limit the value of this study but remained worthy of consideration.

6. Findings and Analysis

6.1 Land Distribution and Concentration

The process of farm engrossment is central to any debate on the mechanisms of agricultural revolution. Although it is generally accepted that from the mid-eighteenth-century farms were increasing in size, the existing historiography is divided as to whether this was led by enclosure or by landlords' pecuniary decisions. Table 1 presents data on the size of landholdings in the manors of Adderley and Drayton and finds significant divergence between the two estates. Adderley tells the traditional story with a 45% increase in the size of the average land parcel and a sharp drop to the median – from 63.41 to 12.16 acres – indicating a consolidation of land at the top and the simultaneous survival of the small farmer or cottager. Strikingly, the number of tenants farming 20 acres or more fell from 29 in 1787 to 9 in 1807 whilst the number of those farming less

increased from 10 to 15.[63] This supports J. R. Wordie's claims of an agricultural revolution leading to an increasingly stratified and unequal rural society.[64] The total number of acres on the Adderley estate fell alongside the number of tenants (by approximately 38%) and so the reduction in land noted between the 1787 and 1807 surveys is unlikely to have impacted the results recorded in Table 1.

The data offers a different story for the Drayton estate, with the mean and the median falling by 53% and 36% respectively despite beginning at relatively low values. Unlike in Adderley, the total acreage recorded on the Drayton estate fell by 60% whilst the number of tenants fell by a disproportionate 20%. This is likely related to the loss of one of their most significant tenants, with the largest plot of land in 1787 (294 acres) disappearing from the estate survey by 1807. This indicates either the removal of the land from the estate or the breaking up of the large parcel into smaller pieces. Interestingly, there was never a single payment within Drayton's rental records that corresponded to this land, hence it is likely to have been previously subdivided and sublet which may explain its disappearance as a single plot in subsequent surveys. As the Corbet estate surveys do not record plot size for urban rentals, it remains possible that the land was built upon and not recorded in future surveys due to the small plot size. Regardless of the mechanism behind this shift, there is an evident loss of large tenants and a potential reduction in the holdings of the average tenant, rather than a decline of the middling farmer as seen in Adderley.

[63] See Appendix 1 and 2 for a decomposition of tenant holdings by farm size.
[64] J. R. Wordie, "Social Change on the Leveson-Gower Estates, 1714-1832" *The Economic History Review* 27, no.4 (1974), 604.

Table 1 – The Size of Landholdings (1787 and 1807)

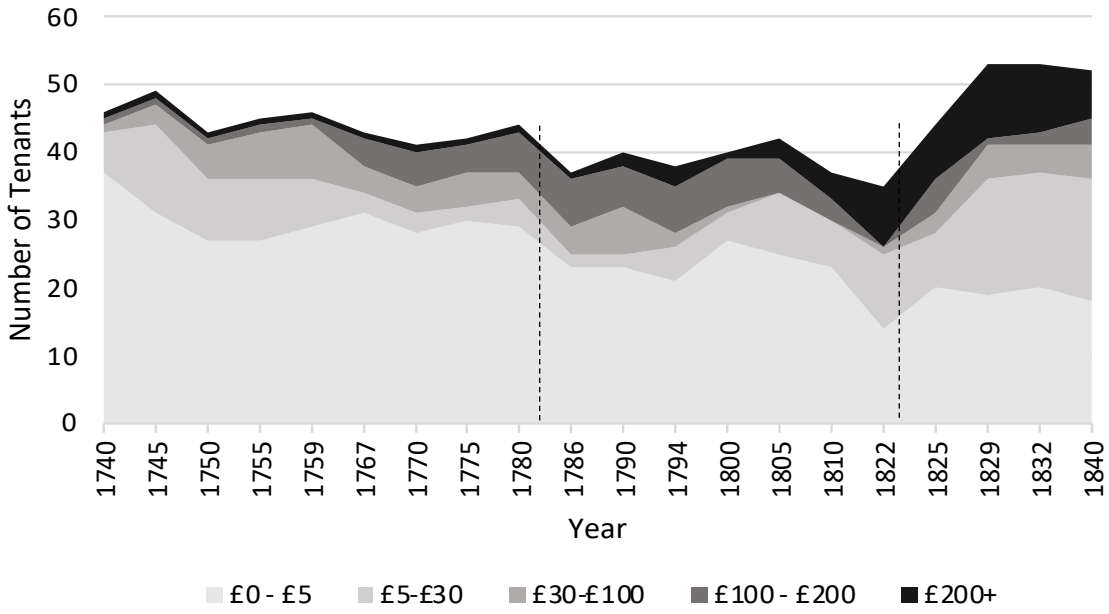
Manor	Year	No. of Tenants	Median Size (acres)	Mean Size (acres)	Largest Holding (acres)	Total Land (acres)
Adderley	1787	39	63.41	51.09	340.86	3212.19
Adderley	1807	24	12.16	74.19	317.47	2001.19
Drayton	1787	72	2.64	15.03	294.37	1014.73
Drayton	1807	57	1.70	7.12	92.97	402.23

Note: Statistics on the size of landholdings in both the Adderley and Drayton estates from the 1787 and 1807 estate surveys. The data excludes wasteland and urban tenants.
Source: Surveys of the estates of Sir Corbet Corbet in Adderley and Drayton, 1787 and 1807, 327/5/2/1/2 and 327/5/2/1/6, Corbet of Adderley Family and Estate Records, Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury.

Figure 4 employs rental values as a proxy for parcel size to consider how the size of tenant holdings changed on an annual basis, as both are directly correlated with the productive capacity of agricultural land during this period. Higher rents are typically related to larger parcel sizes, whilst smaller values imply smallholdings, gardens, and cottages. This is supported by data from the 1787 and 1807 surveys which indicate that rent payments of over £100 were typically made by tenants holding over 100 acres. Similarly, a payment of £5-£30 indicates land in the proximity of 5-50 acres whilst payments of £0-£5 are generally related to cottages and gardens. Data for Drayton is excluded from the graph due to its small (and well distributed) tenant holdings and persistently low rent. Figure 4 presents a broadly stable number of tenants, hovering around the 40-50 mark with a slight decline during the years of Sir Corbet Corbet's rule. The £0-£5 group is consistently the largest across the period, although the graph indicates an almost 50% decline in numbers (from 37 tenants to 18) between 1740 and 1840. Unsurprisingly when considering the decline of the middling farmer indicated in Table 1, the £5-£30, £100-£200, and £200+ categories show the most progression, beginning to increase after 1786 – the first data point following Corbet's 1783 inheritance – and seeing a peak following the transfer of power to the Corbet trustees in 1823. Similarly, the decrease in tenants paying rents within the middle category of £30-£100 corroborates the findings on inequality presented in Table 1. The obvious strength of the £0-£5 and £100+ categories

alongside the downturn of the middling tenant speaks to a period of increasing social stratification and land concentration within the Corbet estate.

Figure 4 – The Distribution of Tenant Rents in Adderley



Note: The distribution of rents in Adderley (1740-1840), deflated using price index (1860 = 100). Vertical dotted lines indicate the change in lordship (1783) and the death of Sir Corbet Corbet (1823). Categories are exclusive of the lower bound and inclusive of the upper bound. Values deflated using Gregory Clark's cost of living index.
Source: Corbet estate rentals (1740-1840), 327/5/4/1/228-358, Corbet of Adderley Family and Estate Records, Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury.

6.2 Tenant Security and Continuity

Whilst Table 1 and Figure 4 imply significant shifts in landholding, both for the substantial tenant in rural areas like Adderley and in favour of the smallholder in urban areas like Drayton, it is important to understand the cause of these shifts. In particular, it is vital to consider whether farm engrossment was occurring through natural processes such as marriage and inheritance, through the sale of land, or whether historic family tenures were being undermined in favour of the new, substantial tenant with access to higher levels of capital. Table 2 presents comparative statistics on the persistence of tenancy types across the manors of Adderley and Drayton to lay out potential motivations behind these shifts to landholding. If landlords were eroding tenant property rights by offering unfavourable leases, it is likely that longstanding tenants were

also being replaced. If this was not occurring, there may be strong evidence to support Mingay's claims of engrossment via marriage and inheritance.[65] There were many types of tenure in manorial estates including copyhold, leases for lives, leases for years, and tenancies-at-will. The most secure tenure, copyhold, was prevalent in the 16th and 17th centuries and did not exist on the Adderley and Drayton estates by 1740. Leases for lives were almost as secure as copyhold, allowing tenants to purchase their holdings with a lump sum payment and subsequently pay a nominal annual sum unrelated to the value of the land.[66] Although these were commonly set for three lives, they were viewed as equal to a lease of 21 years.[67] Leases for years and tenancies-at-will required tenants to pay 'rack rents' equivalent to the full annual value of their holdings, either set for a period of years or subject to change at the lord's will.[68] Whilst both were strictly less secure than a lease for lives, a tenancy-at-will was the most insecure form of tenure as it did not require a written agreement.[69] Lords were simply allowed to remove tenants or raise their rents with very little notice.

Table 2 – Distribution of Tenure Types in Adderley and Drayton, 1787 and 1807

Manor	Year	At Will (%)	Lease for Lives (%)	Lease for Years (%)	Sample Size (n)
Adderley	1787	47.45	42.37	10.17	59
Adderley	1807	89.47	5.26	5.26	19
Drayton	1787	48.39	50.97	0.65	155
Drayton	1807	64.79	33.80	1.41	142

Note: The proportion of tenants by tenancy type across 1787 and 1807 in Adderley and Drayton. Data for 1787 represents the population, data from 1807 is made up of the largest available sample.
Source: see Table 1.

[65] G. E. Mingay, "The Size of Farms in the Eighteenth Century," *The Economic History* Review 14, no. 3 (1962): 479.
[66] J. V. Beckett, "English Landownership in the Later Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: The Debate and the Problems," *The Economic History Review* 30, no. 4 (1977): 574.
[67] Christopher Clay, "Lifeleasehold in the Western Counties of England 1650-1750," *The Agricultural History Review* 29, no. 2 (1981): 83.
[68] Gregory Clark, "Land Rental Values and the Agrarian Economy: England and Wales, 1500-1914," *European Review of Economic History* 6, no. 3 (2002): 281.
[69] Ibid.

Table 2 presents a typical picture of weakening property rights and a dramatic shift towards tenancies-at-will, particularly on the Adderley estate. In Adderley, the proportion of tenancies-at-will increased from 47.5% to 89.5%, with the proportion of leases for lives seeing a corresponding 37.11 percentage point fall. Although the proportion of leases for years fell from 10.17% to 5.26%, 6 new leases for a period of 14 years were created on the Adderley estate in 1807, albeit on the holdings of substantial tenants with over 200 acres. Drayton shares a similar pattern, although the changes are less pronounced. Table 2 presents an increase in the proportion of tenancies-at-will on the Drayton estate by 16.4 percentage points, around a third of Adderley's 42-point rise. Interestingly, the proportion of leases for years also rose with 2 new leases occurring in the 1807 survey for Drayton's largest holdings. It seems that greater security was being offered to the large tenants, likely due to the fact that, as Mingay claims, they were more difficult to replace than the smallholder.[70]

The mix of urban and rural properties on the Drayton estate means it is difficult to gain a complete picture from aggregate values. Table 3 decomposes the distribution of tenure types in Drayton by property type, indicating that urban tenants enjoyed a significantly greater security of tenure than those renting agricultural land – in 1807, 54.54% of urban tenants held a lease for life compared to 0% of agricultural tenants. Most striking is the initially high proportion of tenancies-at-will when compared to Adderley. Although the percentage point increase in agricultural tenancies-at-will between 1787 and 1807 is below that of Adderley (26.6 compared to 42), Drayton began with a much higher proportion (71.43%) of its landholding tenants under these agreements which grew to over 98%. When combined with the data from Table 1, indicating that landholding tenants in Drayton held significantly less land than their counterparts in Adderley, Table 3 supports the earlier finding that small tenants lacked bargaining power and thus were unable to maintain the security of their tenure. This rapid deterioration in property rights for the small tenant in

[70] G. E. Mingay, "The Size of Farms in the Eighteenth Century," *The Economic History* Review 14, no. 3 (1962): 474.

particular represents a series of deliberate decisions from Sir Corbet Corbet. The likely goal of this estate management practice was to increase the ease with which unprofitable tenants could be removed.

Table 3 – Distribution of Urban and Agricultural Tenure Types in Drayton, 1787 and 1807

Property Type	Year	At Will (%)	Lease for Lives (%)	Lease for Years (%)	Sample Size (n)
Urban	1787	31.03	68.97	0.00	87
Urban	1807	45.45	54.54	0.00	88
Agricultural	1787	71.43	26.98	1.59	63
Agricultural	1807	98.04	0.00	1.96	51

Note: The proportion of tenants by tenancy type in Drayton across 1787 and 1807, split between urban and agricultural properties. Data for 1787 represents the population, data from 1807 is made up of the largest available sample.
Source: see Table 1.

If Tables 2 and 3 suggest an intentional switch to low-security tenures for tenants renting agricultural land, it holds that there should also be a turnover of the tenantry. Table 4 presents the top 5 families per year in both Adderley and Drayton, ranked by the total amount of rent paid. These families made up an average of 50% Corbet's total rental income, and as such were substantial tenants.[71] The information in Table 4 can be split into three periods: 1740 to 1780, 1790, and 1800 to 1840. In the first period, we see the same few families dominating the rankings with very limited turnover. From 1790 we see Sir Corbet Corbet enter the Table as the top tenant, indicating that he took a significant portion of land in hand. From 1800, there is a complete turnover of the top 5 tenants, with only the Hudson family persisting throughout this shift. Coupled with the data from Tables 2 and 3, this reveals a landlord who was intentionally undermining tenant property rights to force out longstanding (and potentially inefficient) families.

[71] *Corbet estate rentals (1740-1840)*, 327/5/4/1/228-358, Corbet of Adderley Family and Estate Records, Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury.

Table 4 – Top 5 Tenant Families by Rent Payments in Adderley and Drayton (1740-1840)

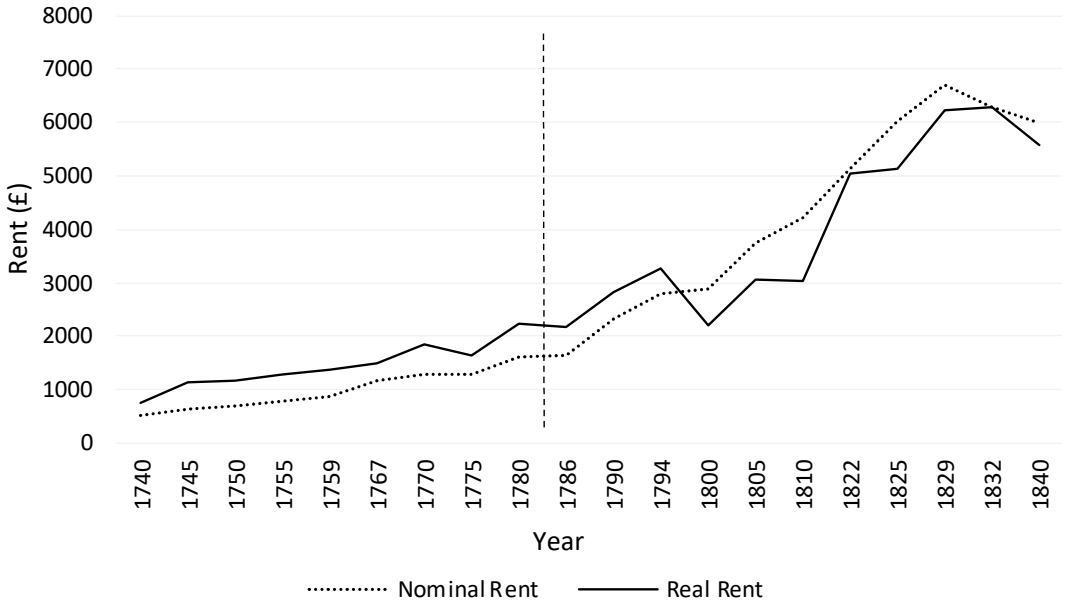
Year	1	2	3	4	5
1740	Hall	Tew	Blantern	Hodgkins	Besford
1750	Hall	Blantern	Tew	Smallwood	Heath
1759	Hall	Tew	Blantern	Hodgkins	Phillips
1770	Hall	Turner	Hudson	Keay	Hodgkins
1780	Hall	Hudson	Hodgkins	Blantern	Skerret
1790	Corbet	Blantern	Hudson	Turner	Keay
1800	Moore	Clough	Hodgkins	Hudson	Overton
1810	Moore	Hudson	Embrey	Stanway	Kemp
1822	Hudson	Moore	Stanway	Kemp	Hunt
1832	Hudson	Moore	Hill	Kemp	Davenport
1840	Hudson	Moore	Hill	Kemp	Duckers

Note: The five highest rent-paying families on the Adderley estate across a century, documenting the changes in landholding before and after the accession of Sir Corbet Corbet in 1783.
Sources: The Corbet estate rentals (1740-1840), 327/5/4/1/228-358, Corbet of Adderley Family and Estate Records, Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury.

6.3 Patterns in Rental Values

It is important to establish a motive for the dramatic changes to holding size and land tenure that have been presented in the previous sections. One logical conclusion is that Corbet was intending to raise the rents to grow his income. Figure 5 presents values for the annual real and nominal rents received from the Adderley and Drayton estates between 1740 and 1840. The graph indicates a twelvefold increase in nominal rents, from £515 in 1740 to the peak of £6600 in 1829. Real rents rose similarly, reaching their peak of £6200 in 1832, an 8-times increase from 1740. This implies that, independent of inflation, the Corbet family increased their annual income from their Drayton and Adderley estates eightfold despite the 43% reduction in their total landholding, as indicated in Table 1. Interestingly, there is an evident shift in the pace of rent hikes immediately following the accession of Sir Corbet Corbet (1783) suggesting that it was his estate management policy, rather than exogenous factors, motivating this change.

Figure 5 – Combined Rents for Adderley and Drayton Estate (1740-1840)



Note: A comparison of nominal and inflation-adjusted (real) total rents across the estates of Adderley and Drayton. The vertical dotted line indicates the accession of Sir Corbet Corbet in 1783, although the first data point following this event is 1786. Values deflated using Gregory Clark's cost of living index.
Source: see Table 4.

Table 5 offers a comprehensive insight into the changing level of rent under Sir Corbet Corbet by presenting statistics on mean rent per tenant and mean shillings per acre between 1787 and 1807. Unlike prior data, Table 5 tells the same story for both the Adderley and Drayton estates: a significant increase in the average rent across the 20-year period and increases to the rent per acre of 155% and 129% respectively. The data presented in Table 4 offers an insight into the average of all landowners across the manors, but it is also possible to decompose these figures by farm size. Although it is difficult to create such a comparison in Adderley due to the small number of tenants, Drayton offers some insight. In the 1787 survey, rent per acre in Drayton differed from 11s for around 90 acres of land, 20*s* for the middling sort, and up to 47*s* for those renting less than 5 acres. Similarly in 1807, the rent per acre was a mere 30-40*s* for the largest tenants, 60*s* for middling farmers, and up to 90*s* for those farming under 5 acres. This indicates a strong negative correlation between farm size and rent per acre and is supported by the findings in section 7.2, indicating that larger

tenants were treated more favourably than small. This is contrary to Robert Allen's view that larger plots yield a higher rent per acre.[72]

Table 5 – Comparative Rent Values (1807 and 1787)

Manor	Year	Mean Rent (£)[73]	Mean Shillings Per Acre	Sample Size (n)
Adderley	1787	41.95	13.71	38
Adderley	1807	91.74	34.99	27
Drayton	1787	7.37	26.82	52
Drayton	1807	17.16	61.53	147

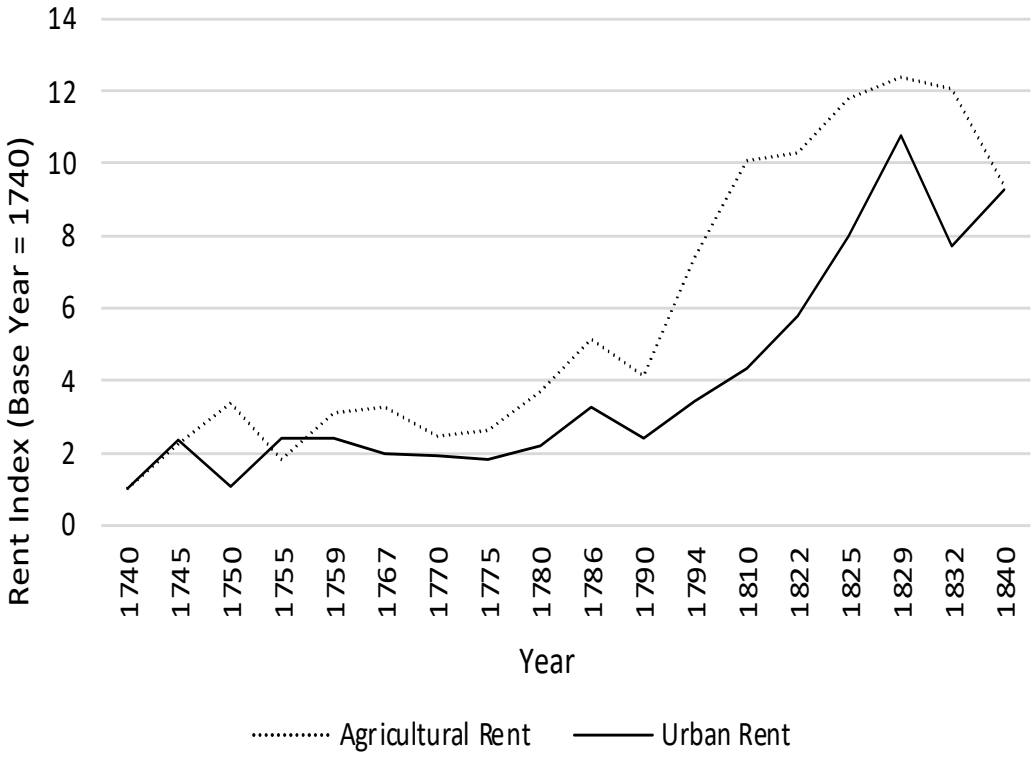
Note: Comparative rent values for tenancies on the Adderley and Drayton estates (1787 and 1807). Data from 1807 represents the complete tenant population (excluding sub-tenants), whilst 1787 figures are derived from rent books (n = 38 for Adderley, n = 52 for Drayton) rather than comprehensive surveys. Values deflated using Gregory Clark's cost of living index.
Sources: See Tables 1 and 4.

A central goal of this study is to understand whether the observed rent increases across the period were due to productivity rises or estate management policies that were intended to redistribute profits from tenant to landlord. Therefore, it is vital to consider the trajectories of urban and agricultural rents, as their historical fluctuations reflect distinct economic and social pressures. Figure 6 presents a comparison of agricultural and urban rent indices, created by calculating an average annual rent payment for both a piece of land and a house across the period. The graph indicates that both urban and agricultural rents increased across the century, albeit at different rates. This is striking, considering that Table 3 shows that urban tenants enjoyed higher rates of lifeleashold – a form of lease that historically prevents landlords from raising the rents within the lifetimes specified. Despite this, further analysis of tenure and the corresponding rents indicates that the average rent on a lease for life outpaced that of a tenancy-at-will, rising from £0.52 to £11.65 between 1787 and 1807 compared to £1.55 to £10.23 within the same period. Evidently, rents were increasing at the same rate regardless of the form of tenure. Agricultural rents

[72] Robert Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 214.
[73] Values such as £41.95 represent £41 and 0.95 of a pound, where £1 = 20 shillings. Therefore, £41.95 should be interpreted as £41 19*s*, rather than £41 and 95 pence.

show more volatility and a steeper curve, but both indices began to increase dramatically following the 1783 accession of the new lord. Ultimately, despite differences in their ascent, Figure 6 shows that average agricultural and urban rents were raised at a broadly similar rate to each other, with a significant trend shift evident after 1783. This suggests that land productivity and urban demographic pressures had little to do with the observed rent hikes, lending credence to the claim that estate management decisions were central to the transformation of the Corbet estates.

Figure 6 – Comparison of Agricultural and Urban Rent Indices (1740-1840)



Note: Trends in deflated agricultural and urban rent from 1740 to 1840. Data for 1800 and 1805 were excluded due to insufficient sample size. Values deflated using Gregory Clark's cost of living index.
Source: see Table 4.

7. Interpretation

Although very few documents of a personal nature to the Corbet family remain, the Corbet estate records provide a vivid picture of the financial pressures facing Sir Corbet Corbet following his inheritance in 1783. The significant restructuring

of land holdings, the erosion of tenant security, and the steep rent increases presented in the previous sections coincide remarkably with his accession and are indicative of an 'agricultural revolution' within the Corbet estate. Most striking is the more than doubling of rent per acre between 1787 and 1807, from 13.71*s* to 34.99*s* in Adderley and 26.82*s* to 61.53*s* in Drayton, presented in Table 5. When coupled with the clear trend shift in Figure 6 indicating that rents began to rise at a faster pace at some point between 1780 and 1786, it becomes clear that the observed transformations are linked to the change in leadership.

In a 1799 visit, the Archdeacon of Salop described Corbet as unpopular with his tenants due to his 'rapacity'.[74] When combined with contemporary evidence of the debt that encumbered his estates, this characterisation reveals a landlord whose aggressive rent policies were likely driven by personal financial pressures rather than agricultural improvements. Sir Leighton Baldwin noted that by 1823 the Corbet estates were so heavily indebted that even after the trustees directed almost the entire income of £12,000 towards repayments for 25 years, significant debts remained.[75] This extraordinary level of debt – despite the eightfold increase in real rents under Corbet's leadership – indicates that his estate management decisions were increasingly intended to service this growing encumbrance and support his ever-increasing consumption. This case demonstrates how individual landowners' financial crises, rather than institutional shifts and productivity gains, could drive fundamental changes in rural society.

Section 7.1 clearly documents a process of rapid farm engrossment on the Adderley estate, with land becoming increasingly concentrated amongst a small group of substantial farmers despite the existence of a growing population of small tenants. This mirrors Wordie's finding that on the Leveson-Gower estates

[74] *Visitation of the Archdeaconry of Salop 1799*, 3916/1/1, Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury.
[75] D C Cox, J R Edwards, R C Hill, Ann J Kettle, R Perren, Trevor Rowley, P A Stamper, 'Domesday Book: 1750-1875', in *A History of the County of Shropshire: Volume 4, Agriculture*. Edited by G C Baugh, C R Elrington (London, 1989), *British History Online*, accessed March 20, 2025, https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/salop/vol4/pp168-231.

the middling farmer was disappearing in favour of both the substantial tenant and those holding less than 20 acres. [76] The Drayton estate showed a strikingly different pattern, however, as the size of the average tenant landholding halved between 1787 and 1807. As mentioned previously, the Drayton estate was largely urban and centred around the modern-day town of Market Drayton thus the rental properties were commonly houses or small gardens. Due to its nature, Drayton lacked the stock of land required to form the substantial properties that were common in Adderley, making this divergence inevitable. Despite their differences, the choice to maintain – and grow – the number of tenancies below 20 acres was made in both Adderley and Drayton implying that the small farmer held some value to Sir Corbet Corbet. This is not supported by existing literature, which suggests a preference for large farms due to their greater efficiency.[77] Wordie attributes the rise of the small tenant to growing population pressures, a view that holds some merit, as census data shows that the population of Adderley grew by 3.6% between 1801 and 1821, whilst Drayton experienced a more substantial rise of 18.2% over the same period.[78] These population changes appear to align with the observed decrease in holding sizes in Drayton and the concurrent rise in Adderley. However, as demonstrated by Appendix 2, the average holding of tenants below 20 acres saw minimal change between 1787 and 1807. In fact, the apparent reduction of average holding size in Drayton can largely be traced to the disappearance of a single 294 acre holding by 1807. The absence of corresponding rent book entries suggests that this holding was subdivided and sublet. When excluded from the data, the decline in the average holding size for both small and large farmers on the Drayton estate between 1787 and 1807 becomes far less significant. Therefore, it is unlikely that population pressure played a major role in the changes to landholding patterns on the Corbet estates. An equally significant finding is that the bulk of these changes occurred within a 20-year period. Mingay suggests that

[76] J. R. Wordie, "Social Change on the Leveson-Gower Estates, 1714-1832" *The Economic History Review* 27, no.4 (1974), 597.
[77] Ibid, 604.
[78] GB Historical GIS, University of Portsmouth, Adderley CP/AP through time, *A Vision of Britain through Time*, https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10171891/cube/TOT_POP.

such a transformation should take a minimum of half a century to occur, and Wordie's observations of the Leveson-Gower estate similarly span almost sixty years.[79] Evidently Sir Corbet Corbet's precarious financial position was causing him to act quickly, hence the Archdeacon's declaration of 'rapacity'.[80]

Corbet's speed in redistributing land amongst tenants is exemplified in section 7.2. Table 4 shows a complete turnover of the 5 families paying the highest rents almost immediately following Corbet's inheritance with evidence that he took a significant portion of land in hand around 1790. He subsequently redistributed his land to an entirely new stock of tenants whilst the previous families either continued in the rent books paying lesser rates or disappeared entirely. This immediate restructuring of the tenantry implies that Corbet was acting rapidly to increase profits. Additionally, a cross examination of parish registers and rentals indicates that engrossment via inheritance was occurring prior to 1790, but that it was not as significant as Mingay claims it to be. This is indicated within Appendix 3, showing the structure and inheritance of the prominent Blantern family. This is one of the most obvious examples of parallel farming and engrossment within the manor, as George Blantern inherited significant holdings from both his father and uncle. This progress was subsequently erased with the redistribution of land after 1790, following which the Blanterns disappeared from the rentals until 1810. Robert Blantern was then able to take over a single 200-acre farm following a rent increase that was rejected by the previous tenants.[81]

Families who rose the ranks following this redistribution show different patterns to the early Blanterns, with the Moore family holding a single farm that passed directly from father to son. The continuation of inheritance without implications for farm size suggests a more business-minded attitude to estate management

[79] G. E. Mingay, "The Size of Farms in the Eighteenth Century," *The Economic History* Review 14, no. 3 (1962): 477.
[80] *Visitation of the Archdeaconry of Salop 1799*, 3916/1/1, Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury.
[81] *Corbet estate rentals (1740-1840)*, 327/5/4/1/228-358, Corbet of Adderley Family and Estate Records, Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury.

with systemic leasing policies that standardise farm dimensions regardless of tenant lineage or connections. This reflects a transition from the feudal system to capitalist agriculture on the Corbet estates, supported by evidence of weakening property rights with the dramatic shift from leases for lives to tenancies-at-will. This data indicates that Sir Corbet Corbet was intentionally weakening tenant agreements in order to support the observed redistribution of land and restructuring of the tenantry.

Interestingly, whilst small tenants were forced into the informal tenancies-at-will the substantial farmers were offered leases and thus increased security. Mingay claims that this was because the larger tenant was able to 'deal with his landlord on equal terms' due to the undersupply of farmers with sufficient capital to take on such a large holding.[82] Wordie concurs, writing that large farms offered a cost saving to the landlord which in turn offered their tenants greater bargaining power.[83] This meant that the substantial tenant had more power to negotiate, and that the landlord was willing to offer preferential terms due to his own savings. It is clear that the observed changes to landholding on the Corbet estates between 1787 and 1807 were driven by an intentional weakening of property rights and the choice to redistribute land to new, substantial tenants. This challenges the traditional view of inheritance and the repurposing of vacant plots as the drivers behind engrossment and indicates that deliberate estate management decisions on the Corbet estate were vital to the observed shift towards capitalist agriculture.

The study of rents provides crucial context to the above claims, offering an insight into the motivations behind the Corbets' dramatic estate transformation. Section 7.3 presents a striking eightfold increase to real rents between 1740 and 1840 and a doubling of rent per acre between 1787 and 1807. These changes coincide remarkably with the accession of Sir Corbet Corbet, and further

[82] G. E. Mingay, "The Size of Farms in the Eighteenth Century," *The Economic History* Review 14, no. 3 (1962): 474.
[83] J. R. Wordie, "Social Change on the Leveson-Gower Estates, 1714-1832" *The Economic History Review* 27, no.4 (1974), 599.

analysis suggests that they were likely unrelated to productivity growth. A common assumption within the existing literature on the agricultural revolution is that rent hikes indicated improvements to productivity, often linked to the growth of large farms.[84] Contrary to this belief, the above analysis suggests a negative relationship between farm size and shows that rent increased at a similar rate regardless of acreage. Additionally, church records offer an insight into agricultural productivity, with a 1799 report showing the 'profits of living' to be £120 in Drayton and up to £500 in Adderley.[85] These profits represent the income of the ecclesiastical benefice and as they were largely derived from tithes – a portion of agricultural output – they serve as a reliable proxy for productivity. Despite Adderley having only three times the agricultural land of Drayton, its ecclesiastical income was almost five times higher, suggesting significantly greater output. This is not reflected in rent per acre, which remained consistently higher in Drayton, challenging assumptions that rising rents were directly related to productivity gains.

The parallel rise of urban and rural rent indices between 1740 and 1840 on the Corbet estate further challenges traditional views on productivity growth. Typically, urban rents reflected population pressures whilst land rents were more closely tied to productivity, hence the likelihood of both rising simultaneously in the absence of endogenous drivers is low. Further undermining the claim of population pressure is the stark contrast between Drayton's population growth and national averages between 1800 and 1840. Whilst Drayton experienced a mere 25% increase, population growth in England reached 79%, calling into question Wordie's assertions of significant population pressure.[86] Given this evidence, it is reasonable to infer that agricultural rent hikes were similarly unrelated to productivity gains. Rather, the evidence suggests that the Sir Corbet Corbet deliberately raised rents to boost his

[84] G. E. Mingay, "The Size of Farms in the Eighteenth Century," *The Economic History* Review 14, no. 3 (1962): 471.
[85] *Visitation of the Archdeaconry of Salop 1799*, 3916/1/1, Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury.
[86] GB Historical GIS, University of Portsmouth, Adderley CP/AP through time, *A Vision of Britain through Time*, https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10171891/cube/TOT_POP.

personal income, effectively transferring wealth from tenants to himself in a redistribution consistent with the processes described by both Allen and Overton.

8. Conclusion

In the early modern period, English agriculture underwent a series of notable transformations that came to be known as the 'agricultural revolution'. Historians write of an increasingly stratified rural society, significant land engrossments, and the gradual replacement of feudal tenures as central to England's shift away from customary manorial structures towards a new, capitalistic mode of farming.[87] Traditional narratives have primarily attributed this change to parliamentary enclosure and the ensuing productivity growth and population pressures.

Although the agricultural revolution is well-studied on a macroeconomic level, there is a dearth of regional studies and a significant underutilisation of manorial documents within the existing literature. Similarly, despite a frequent focus on the impact – or lack thereof – of enclosure, little effort has been directed towards the old-enclosed counties of England, which would crucially allow for the study of agricultural progress in the absence of enclosure. This project has sought to build upon this gap, focusing on the Corbet estates in the old-enclosed county of Shropshire between 1740 and 1840 to ascertain the extent to which estate management contributed to 'agricultural revolution' in the absence of parliamentary enclosure. As a tumultuous period for the Corbets, with 30 years of fragmented control followed by the accession of the profligate Sir Corbet Corbet in 1783, this case study offered a natural experiment for isolating the effects of estate management from broader market considerations.

[87] Mark Overton, "Re-Establishing the Agricultural Revolution," *The Agricultural History Review* 44, no.1 (1996): 4.

To conduct a thorough assessment of this topic, I created an original dataset from the Corbet rent books and surveys. This included information on tenant rent payments, holding sizes, and tenure types and was collected with the intention of addressing three key themes: land distribution, tenure security, and the pace of rent increases. First, I analysed land distribution within the manor, finding that this differed greatly between Adderley and Drayton. The rural parish of Adderley saw the conventionally accepted transformation of the concentration of land into the hands of a few substantial tenants alongside escalating social stratification. Conversely, the number of large tenants fell in Drayton and land was increasingly broken into smaller holdings. In an attempt to understand the mechanisms behind this dramatic shift, I combined a thorough assessment of the security of tenure with information from parish registers, revealing that not only were the property rights of land-holding tenants being intentionally weakened on the Corbet estates, but that this was done with the intention of removing a significant proportion of the tenantry and upending traditional structures of inheritance. The final part of my analysis was an evaluation of temporal rent patterns, undertaken to contextualise the motivations behind the observed shifts to tenure and landholding. These findings were the most revealing as they showed simultaneous increases in average residential and agricultural rents, suggesting that the eightfold increase in real rents between 1740 and 1840 was driven endogenously. Population data from Drayton showing significantly lower population growth than the national average also supports this claim, running counter to the idea presented in the traditional literature that urban population pressures and productivity growth were the biggest drivers of agricultural revolution.

The findings obtained in this study of the Corbet estates suggest that a rural transformation occurred between 1740 and 1840, but that it was not driven by traditional factors such as enclosure, productivity growth, and population pressures. Rather, the data suggests that the observed changes to land distribution, security of tenure, and rent levels were linked to a redistribution of profits from tenant to landlord – much like counter-revisionists Overton and

Allen have suggested. Evidence of Corbet's extravagance and debts lend further credence to this. Ultimately, these findings support the hypothesis that on the Corbet estates, it was deliberate estate management decisions rather than productivity growth that played the crucial role in transforming the rural landscape. However, as Sir Corbet Corbet's precarious financial position and estate management philosophy may not be indicative of larger aristocratic trends, I believe that widening the scope of this study to a broader selection of families and manors across both old-enclosed and unenclosed counties could further inform this evidence.

Appendix:

Appendix 1 – The Size of Landholdings in Adderley (1787 and 1807)

Holding Size	Year	No. of Tenants	Median Size (acres)	Mean Size (acres)	Largest Holding (acres)
< 20 acres	1787	10	2.75	4.07	10.35
< 20 acres	1807	15	6.00	7.26	19.21
20+ acres	1787	29	98.25	109.45	340.86
20+ acres	1807	15	216.38	210.25	317.47

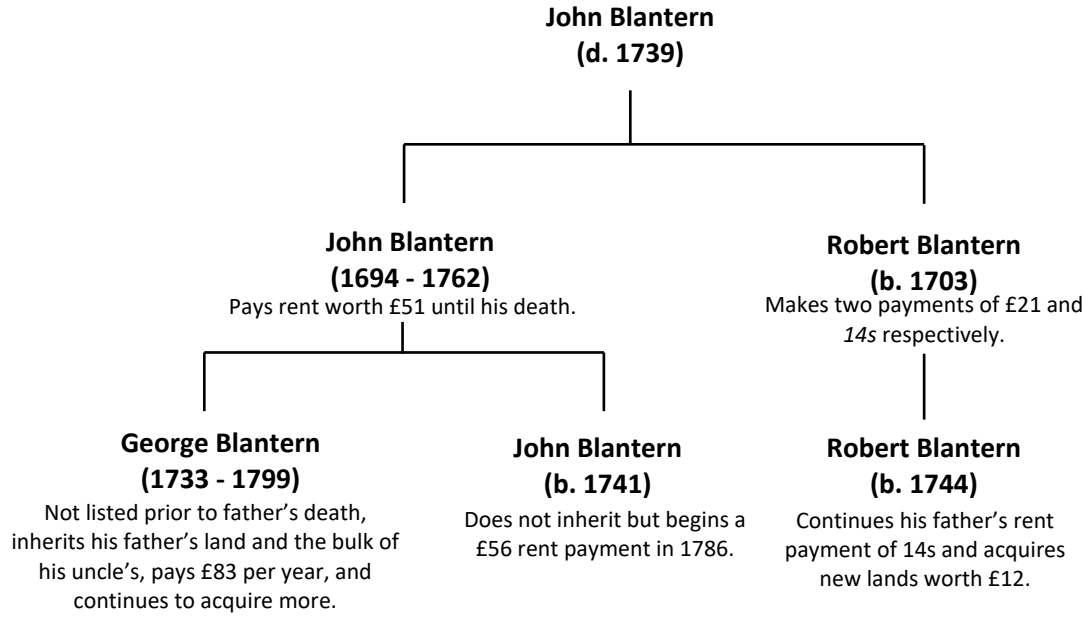
Note:: Statistics on the size of landholdings in the Adderley estate from the 1787 and 1807 estate surveys, decomposed by holding size. The data excludes wasteland and urban tenants.
Source: See Table 1.

Appendix 2 – The Size of Landholdings in Drayton (1787 and 1807)

Holding Size	Year	No. of Tenants	Median Size (acres)	Mean Size (acres)	Largest Holding (acres)
< 20 acres	1787	59	2.16	3.25	16.18
< 20 acres	1807	51	1.56	3.03	17.55
20+ acres	1787	11	80.00	84.96	294.37
20+ acres	1807	4	57.42	59.45	92.97

Note:: Statistics on the size of landholdings in the Drayton estate from the 1787 and 1807 estate surveys, decomposed by holding size. The data excludes wasteland and urban tenants.
Source: See Table 1.

Appendix 3 – Blantern Family Structure and Inheritance



Note:: The structure of the Blantern family including information on inheritance across generations. ***Source***: Adderley Parish Registers, 1692-1812, Shropshire Parish Register Society; Corbet estate rentals (1740-1840), 327/5/4/1/228-358, Corbet of Adderley Family and Estate Records, Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury.

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