An Emerging Capitalist Social-Property Structure

It has been my contention that a capitalist social-property structure in agrarian society and rural industry was becoming clearly visible and taking large strides in England by the middle of the sixteenth century; earlier in some areas and later in others. This view receives support from historians such as Jane Whittle and Andy Wood with their recent acknowledgement that the widespread anti-enclosure rebellions of the 1530s and 1540s were a symptom of emerging agrarian capitalism, and by Keith Wrightson who has recognised that changes in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century were profound and set the context for subsequent change. While one might have some sympathy with Wrightson’s argument that the decisive periods of transformation were still in the future – where a point of no return was reached – his conclusion that farming in England was still predominantly subsistent in the 1520s and that there was no burgeoning capitalist mentality by that time appears as a contradiction to his other conclusion that changes had been profound.

The classic agrarian capitalist class structure in England took the form of the triad of commercial landlord, leaseholding tenant and landless wage labourer. It was never so neat and tidy however and would only become sharply defined and generalised across the whole of England during the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, a less sharply defined but functioning agrarian capitalist social-property structure operating, in Ellen Meiksins Wood’s words, ‘according to principles and “laws of motion” different from those prevailing in any other society since the dawn of history’, and based in particular on the first two elements of the triad, was in place much earlier. In this chapter I will examine developments in Lydd and its region over the course of the sixteenth century, and assess the extent to which an agrarian capitalist social-property structure and capitalist mentalities had developed by the 1530s as a result of fifteenth and early sixteenth-century enclosure.  

Commercial Landlords and Capitalist Tenant Farmers

The decline of serfdom and transformations in the organisation of the lords’ estates between the late fourteenth and early sixteenth centuries fundamentally changed the character of English feudal lordship. After the Tudor state...
dissolved the monasteries in England and Wales in the 1530s, that character took another decisive turn. During the late medieval period it was ecclesiastical lords who dominated ownership of landholding in Lydd and its region. Large leaseholding capitalist farmers emerged in this region as a result of their policies. As we have seen in the previous chapter, in this region at least these lords were often as aggressive as the farmers in expropriating the peasantry. The Archbishop’s Aldington manor which contained the borough of Lydd, and All Souls College which held lands in the west of Lydd parish and beyond, survived the cull of ecclesiastical institutions in the 1530s. However, the lands of Canterbury Cathedral Priory and Battle Abbey were dissolved and the ownership of the farmer’s leases passed into the hands of lay aristocracy and a highly acquisitive gentry. Large capitalist farmers known as yeomen and small gentlemen sometimes acted as landlords and leased their own freehold lands to other farmers and family as it suited them, and they also sub-leased from larger gentry. However, land ownership continued to be dominated by the larger gentry and aristocracy, and their ownership of freehold land in England would increase at the expense of smaller freeholders and be subsequently transferred to the capitalist leasehold sector.

Regarding developments by the seventeenth century, Stephen Hipkin has shown that medium-sized and large farmers on Romney Marsh Level in the 1650s received their leases from a number of owners, including from smallholders. He frames this evidence as contradicting Brenner’s picture of a classic triad of large landlord, capitalist farmer and labourer by the seventeenth century. And yet (in support of Brenner) he finds that the majority of large leaseholders’ lands were typically leased from one owner, and that during the seventeenth century the sometimes blurred line between owner and lessee became increasingly clear and defined. He also shows that sub-leasing was not a significant feature, accounting for only about ten percent of holder’s lands. Limited sub-leasing by capitalist farmers did not therefore blur the picture of these large capitalist farmers holding and farming huge acreages from the greater gentry. The first two elements of the agrarian capitalist triad were firmly installed in the seventeenth century.

The decline of relatively modest occupying freeholders began much earlier however. The gentry capitalised on the earlier achievements of Lydd’s yeoman farmers and at the same time they benefited from grants of monastic property from the crown. We have seen how farmers in Lydd parish in the fifteenth century developed demesne leases on behalf of their ecclesiastical lordship lessors by drawing in neighbouring tenements, and how significant farms were developed by yeomen such as the Robyns through the large-scale engrossment

---

2 Hipkin 2000, p. 655.