

A Grain of Truth: The Nineteenth-Century Corn Averages¹

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THE initial use of the corn averages was to regulate Britain's external grain trade, but during the nineteenth century other functions were added. Many landlords began to use them as the basis of corn rents; from 1837 they were widely utilized in the calculation of tithe commutation payments; and in the 1880s they were acknowledged as a 'public official record of the average prices of [an] important article of working class consumption'.² Historians, too, have made use of the averages for several purposes, among them that of assessing the

value of British corn imports,³ to estimate and examine domestic wheat production,⁴ to form consumer price indices,⁵ as indicators of the state of the harvests,⁶ as guides to social unrest,⁷ and, of course, simply as a record of agricultural prices.⁸ Unhappily, such use has tended either to ignore or to play down the concern of contemporaries as to the validity of the figures.⁹ Apart from the recent work of Adrian, who discusses the reliability of the averages with respect to markets in East Anglia, we have to go back almost half a century, to the monographs of Fay and Barnes, to find any detailed discussion of the calculation of the averages, and even these are not wholly satisfactory because of limitations on the time period covered, and a failure to realize the full implications of the statistical procedures adopted.¹⁰ The intention of this

¹ Where not otherwise stated the statistical data for this paper were obtained from PRO Corn Office Papers, MAF 10/25-7, 298-301, 368-9, the *London Gazette*, and the *Journal of the Statistical Society*. I am grateful for research assistance from Joyce MacMillan and Margaret Williamson, for financial assistance from the University of Edinburgh and the Flinders University of South Australia, and for comments on an earlier version of the paper from my colleagues at Flinders.

² *Select Committee on the Corn Averages* (BPP 1888, X), QQ 22-5, 33. In the twentieth century cereals deficiency payments were also based on the averages.

³ A H Imlah, *Economic Elements in the Pax Britannica*, Cambridge, Mass, 1958, p 31; J R T Hughes, *Fluctuations in Trade, Industry and Finance 1850-1860*, Oxford, 1960, p 61.

⁴ S Fairlie, 'The Corn Laws and British Wheat Production, 1829-76', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXII, 1969; E L Jones, 'The Changing Basis of English Agricultural Prosperity, 1853-73', *Ag Hist Rev*, X, 1962, p 111; D Grigg, *The Agricultural Revolution in South Lincolnshire*, Cambridge, 1966, pp 157-8; M Olson and C C Harris, 'Free Trade in Corn: A Statistical Study of the Prices and Production of Wheat in Great Britain from 1873 to 1914', *Quarterly Jour Economics*, LXXIII, 1959.

⁵ W S Jevons, 'On the Variations of Prices and the Value of the Currency Since 1782', *Jour Stat Soc*, XXVIII, 1865; A Sauerbeck, 'Prices of Commodities and the Precious Metals', *Jour Stat Soc*, XLIX, 1886; R S Tucker, 'Real Wages of Artisans in London 1729-1935', *Jour American Statistical Association*, XXXI, 1930; A D Gayer, W W Rostow and A J Schwartz, *The Growth and Fluctuations of the British Economy, 1790-1850*, Oxford, 1953, I, pp 460-84; E H Phelps Brown and S V Hopkins, 'Seven Centuries of the Prices of Consumables Compared with Builders' Wage-Rates', *Economica*, XXIII, 1956.

⁶ R C O Matthews, *A Study in Trade-Cycle History: Economic Fluctuations in Great Britain, 1833-42*, Cambridge, 1954, pp 30, 34.

⁷ W W Rostow, *British Economy of the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford, 1963, pp 124-5.

⁸ eg J D Chambers and G E Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution 1750-1880*, 1966, *passim*; B R Mitchell and P Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics*, Cambridge, 1962, pp 488-9; T W Fletcher, 'The Great Depression of English Agriculture 1873-1896', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XIII, 1960-61.

⁹ Of the works cited in the previous footnotes only three authors commented on the accuracy of the statistics. Olson and Harris acknowledged that the annual prices which they used were unweighted averages, but carried on regardless; Matthews considered that the figures for the quantities sold were 'notoriously unreliable' as proxies for production; Fairlie agreed that they had deficiencies but felt that they were reasonable indicators of trends and fluctuations. No author went into detail on the validity of the raw data.

¹⁰ C R Fay, *The Corn Laws and Social England*, Cambridge, 1932; D G Barnes, *A History of the English Corn Laws 1660-1846*, 1930; L Adrian, 'The Nineteenth Century Gazette Corn Returns From East Anglian Markets', *Jour Hist Geog*, III, 1977, pp 217-36. Before this article went to press the author was unaware of the index of sales returns produced by Susan Fairlie and published in