The Land Agent in Britain

The Land Agent in Britain:

Past, Present and Future

Edited by

Carol Beardmore, Steven King
and Geoff Monks

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INTRODUCTION

CAROL BEARDMORE, STEVEN KING
AND GEOFF MONKS

The late Dowager Duchess of Devonshire, chatelaine of the Chatsworth estate in Derbyshire, often visited modern land agents in her public speeches and popular writings on rural life. In her 2009 book, she noted:

> Anyone who chooses land agency as a profession has to know everything, from drains to fine arts, from roads to Rembrandts. He must be able to talk in their own terms to lawyers and loonies, gamekeepers and golfers, ploughmen and planners, prime ministers and policemen. Land agents can do just that and a thousand other things besides; they are the people who cheerfully face the problems that will affect the future spirit and appearance of the country and villages to which we are all devoted.[1]

Tact, diplomacy, energy and encyclopaedic knowledge had, she noted, to be tensioned with an entrepreneurial drive, a willingness to embrace opportunity and adversity in equal measure, and the ability to take the toughest decisions in support of the long-term viability of estates and other rural concerns. For "Debo" there was always a genuine sense of amazement that land agents still "balance their books somehow", and of admiration for the way they had to deal with the Common Agricultural Policy; the evolution of a Single Payment Scheme; EU milk quotas; and the enormous amount of government bureaucracy involved in farming agricultural grants and claiming crop subsidies across the UK.[2] Such duties have always attracted men (and increasingly women), across a personality spectrum ranging from the autocratic and determined through to the intellectual and sometimes eccentric. In this perhaps they match the owners of the estates that they serve. And for this role it is personality that matters as much as, and sometimes more than, the qualifications that

[1] D. Devonshire, *Home to Roost and other Peckings* (John Murray: London, 2009), 12.
[2] *Ibid.*

people carry after their name, something that is clear from Steven King's discussion of person and role descriptions for modern agents in his chapter for this volume. We return to the twentieth and twenty-first century agent later in our Introduction.

For now, comparatively little is known about how this complex and fascinating role actually evolved. As Jeremy Moody notes in his contribution to this volume, the functions of land agency came to reside in the ambit of a single individual – the reeve, steward or bailiff – at a very early date. The records of the activities of these men (and some women) survive in county record offices and private muniment rooms, often organised by thematic category (deeds, rentals etc.). It was not generally until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, that such records come to be closely associated with the individuals who oversaw their creation, and both Carol Beardmore and Elizabeth Hurren in their contributions to this volume employ sources drawn directly from archival collections grouped under the names or tenure of agents themselves. This is more than mere accident or changing archival practice. Rather it speaks to the growing professionalisation of land agents from the eighteenth century and their evolving relationships with owners. And with this subtle change of organisation often comes a significant extension of the scope and reach of surviving archives. At their most voluminous they stretch to hundreds of metres of shelf space. Indeed, it is partly the sheer scale of business information available that has put off researchers from attempting a systematic chronological and spatial analysis of the development of land agency and its associated functions. Consequently, our collection has its chronological roots in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while the resonance of historical experiences and concerns with those of modern agents drives our determination to bring the analysis right up to the present day. Almost all of our contributions, however, emphasise just how little historiographical work there has been on land agency, and it is to an overview of this issue that we first turn.

Historical Context

As Jeremy Moody reminds us in his chapter for this volume, the role of the land agent originated in the bailiffs and stewards of the great medieval estates and developed into something more formal from the eighteenth century onwards. As the landed aristocracy and gentry during this period began to amass large amounts of land and property the need for capable, pragmatic businessmen to manage their holdings became essential. This impetus was intensified by the fact that for many landowners' duties of

state and expanding leisure opportunities ensured that they spent ever more time away from their estates and agricultural holdings. Subsequently it became apparent that something or someone needed to relieve the landowner of the day-to-day burdens of estate management.[3] The men who took up the challenge as land agents and estate stewards required many more skills than simply being able agriculturalists. They needed the ability to manage and arbitrate landowner/tenant expectations, a high degree of honesty as large amounts of money frequently passed through their hands, an ability to keep meticulous and up-to-date records and a personal presence which could aid in the social and political control of the rural community. David Spring argues that it is hardly surprising therefore that many landowners turned initially to a profession with which they had already significant contacts and with whom a level of trust had been established: their lawyers and country attorneys.[4] The solicitor was conceived as a "man of business" and this label alone rendered him suitable for the task in hand. Rural enclosure, the exploitation of mineral rights, strict family settlement covenants as well as drawing up sale and purchase documents were other reasons why large landowners increasingly turned to their lawyers to run their estates.[5] Furthermore local attorneys often came from the vicinity of the estate, had established contacts and networks within the region and understood the vagaries of relationships within the rural community. These were important attributes when dealing with a wide and diverse range of social classes, and the establishment of voting loyalty.

Contemporary writers, however, were dismissive of local attorneys a fact aptly illustrated by Edward Laurence in 1731 who stated:

> I have known Instances where a Country Attorney has been Steward to seven or eight Noblemen, and others, and yet has done nothing else but attend the Court-keeping and collecting of Rents; by which means the Tenants have taken advantage of doing what they would with their Farms, quickly lessening the Value of the Estates by *Over-ploughing,* &c.[6]

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[3] G. E. Mingay, "The Eighteenth-Century Land Steward", in E. L. Jones and G. E. Mingay (eds.), *Land, Labour and Population in the Industrial Revolution: Essays Presented to J. D. Chambers* (Chatham: Edward Arnold, 1967), 3.

[4] D. Spring, *The English Landed Estate in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963), 58. The eighteenth century has become known as the "great age of conveyancing", a label which suggests the close levels of association which had already built up between the two groups.

[5] *Ibid.,* 58.

[6] E. Laurence, *The Duty and Office of a Land Steward* (London: John Shuckburgh, 1731), 8.

The idea that solicitors who acted as agents would disregard the estate under their care was a common one. On top of this presumed neglect James Caird commented that such men were "without practical knowledge of the business of farming".[7] As late as 1867 agricultural writers still remarked: "It is a great pity that noblemen and gentlemen suffer themselves to be persuaded to employ country attorneys for their Agents; because it seldom happens that they are qualified for that trust".[8] This attitude in the mid-nineteenth century was hardly surprising when high profile cases like that of Henry and Cheslyn Hall of New Boswell Court, Lincoln's Inn, made the news. *The Times* reported: "They have abstracted the money of their credulous clients-they have pretended to effect mortgages which they did not effect-they have sold out stock which they had no authority to sell out-they have rendered false accounts".[9] The article continued: "it certainly teaches-never solicit the services of any professional man in this branch of the law who is notoriously known to be in some other pursuit than that of his profession".[10] Spring argues that a more common complaint was the technical inadequacy of the solicitor as land agent and nowhere was this more apparent than in the lease covenants. He argued that these sought to secure landowner interests rather than allowing the tenants to farm efficiently and according to local conditions.[11] Despite these misgivings, during the first half of the nineteenth century the majority of estates employed attorney/agents. Estimates as to numbers are hard to ascertain as very little quantitative research has been undertaken. But whenever and wherever close archival studies have been carried out they reveal attorney/agents walking across the pages explored. Indeed, agricultural literature and its incidental handbooks, and pamphlets from *c*1700 to 1900 were often aimed at lawyers and this would not have been the case without a ready market for the information offered.[12]

In practice of course, many of those who worked as estate stewards and agents, even attorneys, were frequently experienced agriculturalists. For absentee owners in particular, almost the entire power and control of the estate rested with the agent, whose duties might consist of: leasing farms and property, keeping accounts, ensuring tenancy agreements were

[7] J. Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850-51* (London: Longman, 1852), 28.
[8] D. G. F. MacDonald, *Hints on Farming and Estate Management, 6th edition* (London: David Green, 1867), 198.
[9] *The Times,* 30 January 1858.
[10] *Ibid*.
[11] Caird, *English Agriculture*, 28.
[12] *Ibid.,* 59.

met, checking farming and husbandry practice, keeping up with repairs of farm buildings, evicting those who became bankrupt or whose arrears were no longer tenable, acting as arbitrator within disputes and even acting as local election agent.[13] Absenteeism was not a symbol of neglect and landowners continued to take an avid interest in their estates. This after all was the crux and basis of their wealth, status and position in society and government. It was far more important to choose the right agent, rather than worry about their professional external interests. Caird argued that the traits to look for were above all "honesty and uprightness".[14] He advocated that the main role of the agent was to choose a "class of tenantry" who would work alongside him to improve the landowner's property. In order to achieve this goal an agent had to understand and be able to provide advice and knowledge on the practicalities of farm management, the most practical methods of arranging and constructing farm buildings, the principles of farm drainage and which fields would most benefit, and above all ensure that his employer's money was spent in the most effective manner.[15]

Unsurprisingly given the discussion of attorney's above, the skills of the land agent were, for almost the entire nineteenth century, developed from either an agricultural background or by learning on the "job". It was not unusual for the incumbent land agent to pass his practice on to his son on his retirement or death in much the same way as the estate property passed from father to son. Agents generally fell into two categories with resident managers being found on the largest estates whilst smaller estates employed an agent part-time or on an *ad hoc* basis. Certainly F. M. L. Thompson argues that an estate with an income of less than £5,000 or £6,000 per annum could not afford to retain a full-time agent, further suggesting that intermittent oversight probably resulted in lower standards of management. It was the owners of these smaller properties who would be most inclined to employ a local attorney, and one who combined the administration of several estates within his legal practice.[16] We revisit this question in Carol Beardmore's analysis of the Dorset estates of the Marquis of Anglesey later in this volume. Meanwhile, the days of the attorney/agent were numbered by the middle of the nineteenth century.

The idea of a training programme for those involved in farming and

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[13] E. Richards, "The Land Agent", in G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The Victorian Countryside* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 439.
[14] Caird, *English Agriculture,* 493.
[15] *Ibid.,* 493.
[16] F. M. L. Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 177-178.

managing land was first evinced in 1651, when Samuel Hartlib had proposed setting up a "College of Husbandry", within which:

> some may teach, some learne and all practise the whole and every part of this so honourable an art … not onely in the more customary and common way, but according to the most excellent rules, that Ingenuity and Experience gained by rational trials and real experiments have or can attaine to …[17]

While nothing came of this proposal, such calls were persistently revisited. William Marshall, one of the most well-recognised and prolific of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century agricultural writers, recognised a need for "seminaries of rural knowledge" in his book on the English Midlands in 1790.[18] At the beginning of the nineteenth century John Loudon put this philosophy into practice and founded one of the first educational establishments at Tew in Oxfordshire to teach the skills which as a journalist he had been advocating.[19] Loudon's establishment was small and short-lived. It was not until 1845 that a more permanent centre was founded in the form of the Agricultural College at Cirencester, Gloucestershire. Today still on the same site and renamed the Royal Agricultural University it retains its connections to traditional agriculture but offers both undergraduate and post-graduate qualifications in land management and rural valuation.

Another nineteenth century impetus to professionalisation and professional training was the rise of the professional surveyor. The developing presence of this role altered the composition and professional leaning of those involved in the trade. At the start of the case studies covered within this volume, surveyors had already begun to establish a foothold in land agency. William Clutton, the third son of the Vicar of Horsted Keynes, had been apprenticed sometime in the 1750s to Robert Chatfield a land surveyor in Cuckfield (Sussex). Chatfield's surviving business books show that besides his normal mapping activities he was actively involved in the management of a number of medium sized

[17] Letter from Samuel Hartlib in H. Barnard, *English Pedagogy: Education, the School, and the Teacher in English Literature* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co, 1962), 193.
[18] W. Marshall, *The Rural Economy of the Midland Counties* (London: G. Nicol, 1790), 121.
[19] G. E. Fussell, *The Old English Farming Books Volume III 1793-1839* (London: Pindar Press, 1983), 90.

estates.[20] During the parliamentary enclosure movement of 1750-1850[21] there was a great need for detailed maps and surveys and the land surveyor found himself at times inundated with work, although the drafting of the bill itself, was predominantly undertaken by lawyers. In 1834, Thomas Chapman, Layton Cooke, Henry Crawter, Edward Driver and James Thomas Tatham met under the leadership of William Blount and formed the "Land Surveyors Club". All had diverse practices and were experienced in "chain surveying and plotting" and their valuation and advisory skills formed an intrinsic part of their professional status. One crucial rule which was laid down at this initial meeting was that no agent (resident or otherwise), civil engineer or auctioneer who had not received an education which allowed them to practice as a land surveyor could be admitted to the club.[22] The founder members encountered difficulties in attempting to define exactly who was eligible for membership. In the end it was decided that any man who had been employed for more than ten years as "a general valuer of tithes, lands and timber and in the agency of estates" should not be disqualified by "his pursuit as an auctioneer" if he could prove he had the requisite experience.[23] The links between surveying, valuing, buying and selling land and auctioneering were so tightly interwoven that it had proved impossible to separate them. Several of our chapters revisit this issue.[24]

In 1868, the Surveyors Club, which had become very much a dining organisation, established the Institute of Surveyors. Within a decade, estimates by the Institute suggest that some sixty per cent of landed property was now managed by surveyors rather than lawyers. There was however a degree of snobbery involved and the larger and great estates distanced themselves from this movement instead keeping to their more traditional means of recruiting men to manage their lands.[25] Little work has been done on exploring the type of men who took up surveying, but the class and status of those who became land agents may have had much

[20] F. M. L. Thompson, *Chartered Surveyors: The Growth of a Profession* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), 31.
[21] Although enclosures took place across the period they were concentrated in two main phases in the 1760s and 1770s and 1793-1815. In the first of these there were according to and David Chambers and Gordon Mingay some 900 and in the second around 2000. J. D. Chambers and G. E. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution 1750-1850* (London: Batsford, 1982), 77.
[22] Thompson, *Chartered Surveyors*, 94.
[23] *Ibid.*
[24] *Ibid*., 96-97.
[25] Thompson, *English Landed Society*, 160-161.

to do with why the aristocracy could not be persuaded to change. In 1902, finally, the Land Agent's Society was formed, and this organisation introduced professional exams in 1920. The Central Association of Agricultural Valuers was formed in 1910 to specifically represent valuers within the agrarian community with a core focus on ensuring and maintaining professional standards. This organisation is explored at greater length in Jeremy Moody's chapter for this volume.

Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

Land agency in the early twentieth-century, then, was being established on an increasingly professional basis. The rest of the century was to bring developments which complicate the role, remit and identity of agents. Jeremy Moody, in his chapter for this volume, deals with this theme, but changes include inter alia: the decline and fracturing of the Great Estates; significant swings in taxation policies for wealth in general and land in particular; the rise of agencies in the form of partnerships or limited and quoted companies; radical changes in the nature of world trade; the increasing farming opportunities offered by the rapid evolution of farming-orientated technology; climate change; and the increasing complexity of running large and diversified businesses which has in significant areas involved the devolution of tasks that might once have been done by agents themselves, to other professional groups. The latter influence in particular can be seen in the varying labels – agent, chief agent, chief operating officer; chief surveyor; chief executive; manager – applied to roles in modern job advertisements that we might understand as encompassing the function of land agency.

Five systemic changes, however, have been particularly important in shaping the function of agency. The first has been changing ownership patterns of landed estates and associated changes in the aims and motivations of those owners. This is of course a considerable theme, but three developments in particular stand out. Thus, an increasing number of estates in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have reverted into the hands of Trusts controlled by families, independent Boards of Trustees or the National Trust. There is no exact figure for the scale of this change, but the trend has clearly involved several hundred thousand acres. Trust reversion in this way invariably involves significant changes to the role of the agent and their place on the estate, not least in breaking direct contact with owners and their individualised interests. For many agents this process has involved a heavy emphasis on diversification, an issue to which we return below. In so far as Trusts have become associated with

job losses, so they have arguably broadened the role of and increased pressure on the agent as an individual. At the opposite extreme, a second development has been a comparatively recent trend towards reassembly of large estates or at least large landholdings after the devastation of the immediate post-war years.[26] James Dyson's remarkable consolidation of modest plots in lowland eastern England to form a nationally significant holding is a prominent example of a much wider trend which stands as a centrepiece to the engrossment process which has led to a sustained rise in the average size of farm plot in arable and pastoral areas over the last two hundred years.[27] As a variant of this process, traditional estates have over the last 25 years once again become buyers rather than sellers of land as alternative income streams have allowed the rolling back of prior economy measures in some places. While little systematic work has been done on how "new breeds" of owners have affected the nature and scope of land agency, anecdotal evidence points to very different decision-making structures, different attitudes towards debt and intensity, and more varied attitudes towards the central purpose of land.[28] Finally, an increasing number of estates have seen radical repurposing. The trend for large properties and associated acreages to be taken over by Schools, Local Authorities and medical institutions such as blind homes that we see in the second half of the twentieth-century has given way to estates becoming theme parks, multiple-occupancy residential sites, and the locus of businesses on a spectrum from hotels and wedding venues to technology parks. Job descriptions for this sort of venture have, as Steven King points out in his chapter for this volume, much in common with those for agents attached to more traditional landed estates but it is no accident that chief executive and chief operating officer are the two most commonly used labels for those in charge of these estates.

A second systemic change has been an inexorable increase of emphasis

[26] For long-term context see D. Brown, "New men of wealth and the purchase of land in Great Britain and Ireland, 1780 to 1879", *Agricultural History Review*, 63 (2015), 286-310; J. V. Beckett and M. Turner, "Land Reform and the English Land Market, 1880-1925", in M. Cragoe (ed.), *The Land Question in Britain 1750-1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), 219-36; and M. Turner, "The demise of the yeoman, c.1750-1940", in J. Broad (ed.), *A Common Agricultural Heritage? Revisiting French and British Rural Divergence* (Exeter: British Agricultural History Society, 2009), 83-103.

[27] "Sir James Dyson now owns more land in England than the Queen", *Daily Telegraph*, 28 December 2014.

[28] See, for instance, the Holdenby Estate in Northamptonshire: http://www.holdenby.com/house-estate.php.

on financial sustainability and with it income diversification to stand alongside a more traditional focus on cost control. By the early 2000s very few estates relied solely on farming and rentals (both rural and urban) to generate income streams. At their lowest level, diversification schemes have involved music and displays in parklands, house tours, sculpture gardens, fairs, craft workshops and weddings. For some estates, spectacular gardens have provided a remarkably popular draw for tourists[29], while in others the intensive exploitation of estate property for holiday rentals has come to underpin the concept of sustainability.[30] Game shooting, as John Martin points out in his chapter for this volume and elsewhere, has also been an important diversification strategy.[31] More recently the potential to yoke estate strategies and resources to developments in the energy and eco-energy sectors – in the form of biomass electricity generation, wind and tidal farms and solar farms – has provided an opportunity, albeit not always uncontroversial, to generate substantial recurrent incomes. At the opposite extreme, City fortunes and incomes have allowed some estates to close their doors or reduce their engagement with tourists, substituting one form of diversified income for another. These diversification strategies do not always yield the results that owners and agents might have hoped, especially when we factor in opportunity costs on land use and the time of those involved. Nonetheless, each new layer of diversification, especially if it has high marginal costs, changes the role of the agent, the nature of the skills set required and the ability or willingness to divest tasks to other specialists outwith the estate itself. Nowhere is this clearer than in the demands on the agent /CEO/COO brought about by having to deal in sustained fashion with members of the public and the day-to-day and strategic issues that they raise.[32]

Related to the issue of sustainability, a third systemic change for the twentieth century has been a decisive intensification of the farming and land use process. While the presence and influence of giant agri-businesses has often been overblown, the consolidation of post-enclosure fields that begins decisively in the early twentieth-century has continued

[29] See for instance the Garden of Surprises at Burghley House in Rutland: http://www.burghley.co.uk/about-burghley/gardens-deer-park/garden-of-surprises/
[30] As at the Flete Estate in Devon: http://www.flete.co.uk/
[31] J. Martin, "The Transformation of Lowland Game Shooting in England and Wales in the Twentieth Century: The Neglected Metamorphosis", *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 29 (2012), 1141-1158.
[32] See for instance the "fury" of the Weld Estate (Dorset) at having to upgrade footpaths at a cost of £150,000. *Daily Mail*, 2 April 2015.

for much of the last hundred years, as we have argued above. Intensive farming of these larger acreages was a totemic practice from 1939 and has only recently been heavily nuanced by environmental protections afforded by law, subsidy and grant.[33] Precision farming has also begun to change our understanding of the concept of intensity and seems destined to change decisively the character of farming and the role of agents and the people they manage. In this context, in-hand estate farming has probably increased and while prices continue to oscillate wildly it seems clear that broad national and global framework conditions (increasing populations, changing dietary norms towards meat and dairy, rising urbanisation) will underpin a longer-term resurgence in the place of farming itself in estate incomes. How far agents and their equivalents will once again be required to have a strong practical farming background is a moot point, but the syllabus content of BA and MA degrees at a place such as the Royal Agricultural University certainly suggest that those who hold the keys to the early parts of the development process for agents have been alive to the basic and growing importance of farming itself in modern estate management.

Of course, all of these developments take place in an increasingly complex system of national and extra-national regulation and state controls. Indeed, this fourth systemic issue has become a byword for rural Britain in the later twentieth-century.[34] In little more than one hundred years, estate and land management/farming has moved from being lightly to tightly regulated. Across a spectrum running from health and safety legislation and environmental controls through land use controls associated with subsidies and to animal tracing and the use of pesticides, the accumulation of "red tape" has been profound. Whether we view it positively or negatively, the increasingly sophisticated advice literature for agents and their equivalents in the form of briefing notes by CAAV, RICS and myriad consultancies and corporate agencies points to the way that this development has shaped the role description for agents. It is no surprise, then, that most modern agents are members of the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors and often have other professional qualifications which equip them to deal with a new set of challenges. But such challenges have, as we have suggested above, also led to a fracturing of the role, involving the use of specialist services from lawyers,

[33] J. Martin, "The state directed food production campaign and the farming community, 1939–45", *Family and Community History*, 17 (2014), 47-63.
[34] B. Burkitt and M. Baimbridge, "The performance of British agriculture and the impact of the Common Agricultural Policy: An historical review", *Rural History*, 1 (1990), 265-80.

accountants, and consultants to buttress the core agential duty of securing the long-term financial stability of estates.

A final systemic change, kicking in strongly from the later twentieth-century, has been a renewed national and international concern with environmental sustainability. The day-to-day business of farming – water and pesticide usage, phosphate run-off, cropping patterns and even livestock flatulence – has come in for intense public, academic and regulatory scrutiny.[35] Environmental concerns also extend to other areas of estate activity, as we see in widespread local resistance to green energy projects which might affect views of the landscape, bio-diversity and birdlife. Even attempts to diversify income through greater tourist traffic might fall foul of environmental concerns about noise and exhaust pollution. While the working lives of those who have undertaken the management of land and rural estates has never been one of mere agricultural expertise, reacting to and profiting from the environmental agenda of the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries poses particular challenges to agents and their equivalents. As well as practical knowledge, this has involved new networks of knowledge and the intersection of land agents with groups (scientists, activists, national interest groups, civil servants) for whom previous conversations may have been rather more distant and episodic. John Lawrence's 1806 statement that "to form an accomplished land steward, it is requisite that theory and practice go hand in hand", rings true on environmental matters even more keenly than in other areas of agential practice.[36]

Investigating Agency?

The rest of this volume turns then, to the role, practice and representation of land agency. Our authors, sometimes within chapters and certainly across the volume, fuse together historical and modern perspectives in a way which has not been apparent in the secondary literature hitherto. Indeed, and as we have argued in this chapter, that literature remains relatively threadbare notwithstanding the central importance of agents to the rural economy and society. Our authors thus offer a major new insight into this much neglected function. Chapter 1 sees Jeremy Moody open

[35] See for instance J. Sheail, "Pesticides and the British Environment: An Agricultural Perspective", *Environment and History*, 19 (2013), 87-108 and "Cow emissions more damaging to planet than co2 from cars", *The Independent*, 10 December 2006.

[36] J. Lawrence, *The Modern Land Steward* (London: Black, 1806), 55.

this volume with an examination of the land agent across the last millennium. Against a backdrop of technological developments, changes in farming practice, the coming of professionalism and the intervention of the state he links the Anglo-Saxon agent of the *Gerefa* with the modern educated practitioner today. Moody suggests, and this will be illustrated throughout all of the chapters, that the agent's skills and knowledge of farming, people, local conditions and adaptability to the current economic climate remain as important in the present as they have in the past.

The path to professionalisation is taken up in Chapter 2 by Geoff Monks who argues that this was partly forged by mechanisation and governmental legislation. During the nineteenth century there was a general expansion of professional status, which, in the case of the land agent, was difficult to define because of the individualistic nature of the work. At Welbeck, Monks explores the impact mechanisation had on the role of the agent and the ways in which this process aided professionalisation. Legislation too played a part particularly in the form of the 1870 Education Act. The 5th Duke of Portland saw this as a threat to his overall control of buildings and tenants within his estate. William Cripwell's people skills were thus put to the test in negotiation with state and local populace. This expansion beyond agriculture heralded the multi-functional role of the modern professional rural manager.

In Chapter 3 Caroline Dakers takes a different approach, surveying perceptions of the land agent as he "strolls confidently" across the pages of the nineteenth century novel. The authors featured include Jane Austen, Mrs Gaskell and George Eliot who all had some form of personal connection to practising agents. Dakers intertwines the characters from a variety of works with the contemporary agricultural writers of the day, while at the same time exploring the foundation of some of the biggest modern firms who specialise in land management. Importantly her research adds a multi-disciplinary approach to this volume and emphasises the importance and function of this profession across time.

Carol Beardmore in Chapter 4 explores the versatility and adaptability of land agents in a single estate case study. The Castleman family were agents to the absentee Marquis of Anglesey on his Dorset and Somerset estate for some forty years. At the core of this chapter are the different partnerships which the land agent forged across the rural community, acting as the bridge between absentee landowner and tenants. The extensive correspondence of the Castlemans and the returned personally noted letters by Anglesey show how these worked in practice. The chapter dispels the myth that an estate where the landowner visited infrequently was not well run.

John Martin in chapter 5 marks the start of the transition in the volume to the function of modern land agency. He investigates the way in which country sports and in particular shooting has and can re-connect the rural landscape through leisure to those who live and work in urban conurbations. In many ways game shooting mimicked the financial fortunes of agriculture, increasing and decreasing according to economic pressures on the land, although it has often been a force for continuity rather than change. The chapter suggests that despite its sometimes slim profitability the management of a gaming estate can provide the land agent with a wide variety of skills which are transferable to a more general diversification process.

Steven King in Chapter 6 takes a two-pronged approach to the study of land agents intertwining the challenges faced by Richard Hodgkinson in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to that of the modern practitioner. A direct comparison is drawn between the advertisements placed by landowners today with the work undertaken by Hodgkinson. A further contrast is offered through the exam papers of the Central Association of Agricultural Valuers. This chapter focuses on continuity and change and suggests that while the landscape within which the land agent practises may alter the role retains many of its traditional elements. Hodgkinson for example battled over the routes of canals while the modern agent faces the challenges posed by the HS2 line. This collocation between historical and modern land agent lies at the heart of the volume.

Nick Morris, CEO of Stowe School Estate, examines the practicalities of running an estate with partners such as the National Trust in Chapter 7. This brings the working life of the land agent into the present day as Stowe is run as an independent school with the gardens a highly popular visitor attraction for the National Trust. The ongoing and complex negotiations which form an integral part of the success of the continued conservation of the Grade 1 listed mansion and its extensive grounds, are a testament to the people skills whose importance Jeremy Moody advocates in Chapter 1. Importantly for this volume it takes the land agent away from a predominately rural setting and emphasises the need for pragmatic business skills. The chapter builds on the adaptability of the Castleman family and emblematically demonstrates the positivity that the land agent can bring to a complex management system.

In Chapter 8 Elizabeth Hurren concludes with a juxtaposition of the modern and Victorian agent. Her chapter examines the historical prism created by three land agents on the Althorp estate: John Beasley, Joseph Noble Beasley and Alexander John Morley from the “golden age” of High Farming, through the long and deep agricultural recession from the

mid-1870s, to the beginning of the First World War. Above all these three men provide an emblematic illustration of the face of good and bad land management. Morley in particular guided Althorp through an incredibly difficult period in the estate's history. This final chapter links all the themes encountered across this volume with the Victorian land agent creating the bridge between the historical and modern professional practitioner.

Looking forwards, the immediate future holds considerable threats and opportunities for the agricultural sector as a whole, and landed estates in particular. So called "Brexit" has at the time of writing had little impact on Britain, but the unwinding of CAP and a raft of associated European environment-related legislation clearly will pose a significant challenge to owners and farmers. A new Prime Minister with an agenda to finally address inequalities in the housing market with a substantial new building programme similarly poses challenges and opportunities. At some point in the future a new referendum on Scotland could lever apart the United Kingdom and bring with it radical changes to land ownership. And we should not forget that radical weather patterns, wild swings in global food prices and an inexorably growing global population have not gone away as influences on the nature and intensivity of local farming. In this sense, the role of the land agent and the scope of his (and increasingly her) work is a crucial mediator of these national and global trends. As we enter a future more uncertain than it has been since the late 1920s and 1930s the agent and equivalent actors will be crucial to the defence, re-invention and re-invigoration of the countryside.

CHAPTER ONE

THE REEVES TALE: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

JEREMY MOODY

Context

The influence of the land agent has always been dependent on the knowledge, personality and methods used to shape the rural communities for which they have been responsible. His – and until very recently almost all land agents were men – core function was to act as intermediary between landowner and tenant; passing on appropriate local information and advice to an employer whilst simultaneously promoting the situation of the tenant farmers.[1] A good agent was one who improved agricultural practice and increased land values, but the very best were those who allowed the public credit for their work to be channelled to their employers.[2] More widely fostering mutual respect between landlord and the rural community was an essential component of the role, such that an agent frequently had to adjust and adapt his managerial skills not just to differing soils and countryside but also to the individual characteristics of the landowner. Chapters 4 and 8 in this volume illustrate the nature and complexity of this individualised and situational relationship very well.

Against this backdrop, defining the limits and scope of the role - both historically and in the present – proves difficult and several chapters in the current volume explore this matter directly or indirectly. Professional labels have always been broadly understood when applied to lawyers or accountants even though the specific activity of the individual might be evident or understood and they might work in a variety of employment

[1] R. Houston, *Peasant Petitions: Social Relations and Economic Life on Landed Estates, 1600-1850* (London: Palgrave, 2014), 45.

[2] E. Richards, "The land agent", in G. Mingay (ed.), *The Victorian Countryside, Vol. II*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 440.

relationships, organisations or regulatory systems.[3] By contrast, the work of the land agent is not seen in the same way. Rather, it unfolds within multiple regulatory contexts, requires diverse knowledge bases and has widely divergent day-to-day expectations and activities. Labels thus have rather less traction. Historically, the problem has been confronted by adopting the generalised title of the "rural profession", a term which encompassed all those involved in any form of land management or agricultural valuation.[4] In its early variations, this label pertained almost entirely to land agents who were retained or employed to manage rural property. In the twentieth century, however, it has come to have a much wider meaning. Modern agents have diversified and their work melds more-or-less seamlessly into that traditionally portioned off for other professional groups, including accountancy, the law, development of technology, energy management, curation and local and national politics. The continuity of the profession relies on a bespoke service assembled to meet the individualistic needs of the land or its owner, but it is clear that catch-all labels (such as the rural profession) are becoming increasingly unsatisfactory and may never have been fit-for-purpose. This, fused with the dual observations of the longevity of the role and the surprisingly limited research base on land agents from historians, demands the broad overview of the history of the profession from its medieval origins to the establishment of agricultural colleges and the foundation of the Central Association of Agricultural Valuers (CAAV), offered here. This chapter will therefore: firstly, examine the historiographical and contextual role of the land agent; secondly it will survey the development of education; thirdly it will investigate the issues surrounding modern practice; and finally we survey the challenges which those practicing in the twenty-first century might face. Through exploring the characteristics of land agents across the millennium it is possible to evaluate both continuity and change. Continuity encompasses good people skills, managing land owner expectations and ensuring the land is farmed responsibly, all attributes which would have been recognised by the Anglo Saxon Reeve. Change is emblematically illustrated by technological advancements, governmental intervention, a population which has continued to rise and a world concentration on food security.

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[3] On the rise of the professions see P. J. Corfield, *Power and the Professions in Britain 1700-1850* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[4] See J. Thirsk, *The Rural Economy of England: Collected Essays* (London: Hambledon, 1984), 356-8.

History

There has always been a fundamental need for rural land to be managed. W. G. Hoskins stated "there are not many places where one can feel with … complete assurance that this is exactly as the first inhabitants saw it". Even in the most remote of places, little of the English landscape has escaped being altered by man.[5] Left untended it will always, and often surprisingly swiftly, revert to scrub or wasteland. From the Mesolithic period onwards agriculture has converted the countryside into a farmed landscape. Large areas were cleared by Neolithic man and the marks made by the plough can still be found underneath the barrows on the Wiltshire downs. Historians have debated the improvements made during the Agricultural Revolution, for instance through marling, but Pliny recorded this British practice during the Roman occupation.[6] When the climate has permitted the uplands on the Welsh hills and other areas such as Dartmoor were cropped. With each change in economic circumstances we have utilised and adapted the resources of the countryside to our own ends. Like the soil, woodlands were closely managed, whether for charcoal, or the controlled growth of specific timbers for the construction of houses, ships, sport, weapons or other uses. The power of the rivers was harnessed into leets to serve mills, to create water meadows which prevented the ground from freezing during winter, or for the transport of goods and men.[7] This utilisation of the countryside created an immensely wealthy nation which was attractive to Roman, Viking and Norman invaders. Although a considerable amount of physical activity was necessary to mould the landscape it is much more a story of human activity, organisation, agreements and disagreements set within a framework of personal objectives, economics, management, judgement and advice. Other socio-political factors impacted on the time, inclination and skills available to the rural landowner to manage these aspects a vacuum was created and this gap was filled by the antecedents of the land agent and agricultural valuer, to whom we now turn.

Roman commentators including Cato, Varro, Columella and later

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[5] W. G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1955), 17.

[6] See Pliny, *Natural History History, XVII,* Chapter 4 and for a core general discussion of Roman agriculture, see F. Seebohm, *The English Village Community: Examined in its Relation to the Manorial and Tribal Systems and to the Common or Open Field System of Husbandry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 edn), 415-23.

[7] R. Jones, *The Medieval Natural World* (Harlow: Pearson, 2013).

Palladius wrote texts relating to agriculture.[8] There was an assumption that farming was the ideal occupation for a free man, reinforcing the virtue and ideas of industry, economy and justice and in turn producing sturdy and independent citizens. This importance was illustrated by Cicero who wrote "of all the occupations by which gain is secured, none is better than agriculture, none more profitable, none more delightful, none more becoming to a freeman".[9] Although many of the senators and emperors had great estates located across the empire which would have made visiting them personally impossible, little literature relating to their management has survived even if it originally existed. In his *De Agricultura*, Cato devoted a small section to the duties of the overseer and stated that "He should maintain discipline. He should observe the feast days. He should respect the rights of others and steadfastly uphold his own". Furthermore, it was suggested that his role included managing the lands and settling any quarrels that occurred. In order to set a good example Cato advocated the overseer should be sober, keep his hands busy and ensure they carried out the wishes of his master.[10] All of these traits are observable in the nineteenth century agent and to a certain extent those who practise this profession today.

In Anglo-Saxon England, the first record of a reeve is from 600AD.[11] In *c.*789 AD, the King of Wessex's reeve had the doubtful distinction of being the first man in England recorded as killed by the Vikings.[12] It was recorded that when "three ships of Northmen from Hæretha land" were observed on shore in Wessex: "the reeve rode against them and would have driven them to the king's town for he wist not what they were and there men slain him".[13] The surviving will of Æthelnoth, royal reeve at Eastry Kent, and his wife Gænburg from 805-832AD provided that their land at Eythorne would pass on first death to the surviving partner and

[8] *Marcus Porcious Cato, on Agriculture* (London: Loeb, 1914); T. Owen (ed.), *The Three Books of M. Terentius Varro Concerning Agriculture* (London: Biblio Bazaar, 2014); E. Forster (ed.), *Lucius Junius Moderatus Columella on Agriculture and Trees* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2012); T. Owen (ed.), *The Fourteen Books of Palladius Rutilius Taurus Aemilianus, on Agriculture* (London: Kessinger Publishing, 2010).
[9] *De Officiciis 1* (London: Loeb, 1913), 92-151.
[10] *Roman Farm Management: The Treatises of Cato and Varro, Done into English by A Virginia Farmer* (New York: Loeb, 1913), 32-33.
[11] R. Flemming, *Britain after Rome: The Rise and Fall, 400-1070* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), 211.
[12] For Anglo Saxon Chronicle see M. Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, (London: Phoenix, 2000), 54.
[13] G. Allen, *Anglo-Saxon Britain* (New York: Loeb, 1910), 124.