

FARMING AND LAND-HOLDING IN WOOD-PASTURE EAST ANGLIA 1550-1650

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SINCE THE SECOND World War much has been written about the rise of the gentry, but less attention has been paid to the social and economic circumstances of the class below them in early modern rural England. In one area at least, whatever was happening to the gentry, the fortunes of the yeomen were rising at the same time as their numbers were increasing. Inevitably, as with the gentry, some were declining and others were merely holding their own in economic terms, but taken as a whole the yeomen of wood-pasture Norfolk and Suffolk were improving their economic and social position during the century from 1550 to 1650. This improvement in their circumstances was probably short-lived, and in the 18th if not in the late 17th century the smaller yeomen farmers entered on a long decline. It is not suggested that a similar rise in the fortunes of the yeomanry occurred all over England in the Elizabethan and early Stuart period, but only that it was a feature of wood-pasture regions. Until the end of the 17th century East Anglia was one of the wealthiest, most densely populated and economically advanced parts of England, so it is not surprising that its yeomanry should have been so successful in the early modern period. The basis of its prosperity was a London food market-orientated agriculture combined with a flourishing by-industry; this combination of farming and by-employment was characteristic of a pastoral economy.

Table 1 demonstrates that the actual numbers of yeomen leaving wills in the first half of the 17th century were more than double those of the preceding fifty years. After 1603 it was much more usual than it had been earlier for testators to state their occupation or status, and this must in part account for the increase in the number of yeomen wills proved in the three courts covering Suffolk.¹ In spite of this factor, a percentage increase of 13 per cent for yeomen at the same time as a decrease of 14.5 per cent in husbandmen testators indicates a definite rise of the yeomanry at the expense of small farmers. Compared with other parts of England, such as Oxfordshire (Havinden 1965), the term husbandman was much less commonly used in Suffolk, and it seems improbable that the increase in the number of yeomen is due solely to the sons of husbandmen giving themselves a superior title.

TABLE 1: STATUS OF TESTATORS OF SUFFOLK WILLS PROVED AT NORWICH AND IN THE COURTS OF THE ARCHDEACONS OF SUDBURY AND SUFFOLK

	<i>Yeomen</i>	<i>Husbandmen</i>	<i>Craftsmen/Tradesmen</i>	<i>Gentlemen</i>
A. 1550-1603	2212 (39%)	1854 (32.5%)	1436 (25%)	193 (3%)
B. 1603-1650	4511 (52%)	1550 (18%)	2100 (24%)	466 (5%)

The detailed evidence of the wills and inventories of yeomen from a number of wood-pasture parishes shows that levels of wealth and comfort were rising in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, and that there was a decided improvement in the economic circumstances of these yeomen. Engrossing of farms by landlords or exceptionally wealthy yeomen seems to have been far less common in the wood-pasture districts than elsewhere (Spufford 1974, 65-86). In the former regions there were large numbers of freeholders well able to preserve their independence. A dairy farmer could prosper on a far smaller acreage than was needed to bring an arable farmer a comparable standard of living, and the existence of by-employments helped

to cushion the former against crises brought about by bad harvests or a fall in the price of his produce.

A case can be made for regarding the Waveney valley as a separate farming region within the wood-pasture district of East Anglia, which extends from the central Suffolk plateau into south Norfolk. As a farming region the Waveney includes not just the river valley itself, but also the higher ground for about four or five miles to the north and south of it. In length it extends some twenty miles from close to the source of the river, at Redgrave fen near Diss, to Beccles in the east. One of the distinguishing features of the Diss to Beccles stretch of the Waveney valley is that this is an area where much hemp was grown; its cultivation fitted in well with dairying. A will and inventory-based survey of the distribution of linen weavers in Norfolk and Suffolk between 1600 and 1800 shows that the largest concentration is to be found in the upper valleys of the rivers Waveney and Little Ouse (Evans 1984, maps 3 and 4); this latter river also rises in Redgrave fen, within a few yards of the source of the Waveney. The majority of these river valley linen weavers were also dairy farmers, and one of the noticeable characteristics of the Waveney valley sub-region is the high incidence of families engaged in dual occupations. The presence of water meadows in the valley bottom, combined with the excellence of communication by water, meant that the area was better suited to dairy farming than any other part of the wood-pasture region. This area was particularly fortunate in its geology and geography, and thus likely to support a high concentration of yeomen. Beyond Beccles the river enters the coastal marshes, where the farmers were graziers rather than dairy farmers.

An analysis of the type of farming practised, and its influence on society, in the nine parishes of South Elmham between 1550 and 1650 can be regarded as a case-study of the Waveney valley sub-region and of the wood-pasture area as a whole. These villages, which lie partly in the river valley between Harleston and Bungay and partly on the clay uplands to the south, are typical of this region. There were a considerable number of yeomen living in these villages in the century under discussion, and their presence makes them a suitable subject for a study of yeoman farming and wealth.

The type of farming practised, patterns of inheritance and land tenure are all major determinants of the character of rural societies. The physical geography, climate and soil structure of a region in some cases can determine the type of farming followed there, but in the case of South Elmham these factors seem to have been less important as determinants than they appear to have been in other regions, for the wood-pasture region of Suffolk and Norfolk is favoured with a climate and a geography which allow for more than one kind of agriculture to be practised successfully.

The settlement pattern of the wood-pasture region of Suffolk has been described as that of an area practising pastoral farming and of a type more usually associated with the highland zone, that is, hamlets or solitary farmsteads (Thirsk 1967, 46). Because the only matter needing communal regulation was the control of grazing on the commons, in these areas the community was not firmly held together by manorial discipline as it was in the open field region. The manor courts' main business, apart from registering land transfers, was prosecuting tenants who failed to clean ditches or to keep roads and paths clear, or who misused the commons.

The terminology used in Elizabethan and early Stuart court rolls and other documents suggests an enclosed landscape in South Elmham. The word *campus* never occurs in the court rolls, but *inclusum* is very commonly found. Land is very frequently described as lying in a particular close.² The only areas of South Elmham which seem not to have been enclosed by 1550 were the meadows in the Waveney valley, but these were divided up amongst individual owners or tenants and were marked out into doles or strips. There seems no reason to disagree with the claim that wood-pasture Suffolk was an early enclosed area, where enclosure was probably nearly complete by 1500 (Thirsk, 1967, 7).³ Further west, roughly speaking beyond

Eye, at least parts of open fields seem to have survived for much longer.

In the absence of open fields or large areas of marsh or heath for grazing, commons or greens played an important part in the farming economy of wood-pasture East Anglia. The lack of reference in East Suffolk documents to the use of fallow land and harvested arable for grazing suggests that this was not practised communally, so the need for commons was greater than in areas where stock could be turned onto the stubbles and fallows (Wade Martins 1971, 332). There is still a large number of greens and commons in wood-pasture East Anglia, and in the past there were many more. Some must have disappeared in the 17th and 18th centuries, possibly enclosed by private agreement, as happened in the case of Hussey Green in Fressingfield, another north Suffolk parish.⁴ As early as the 1640s a Fressingfield will⁵ refers to a lately enclosed green. The number of enclosures made by Act of Parliament for the wood-pasture region is small and they only concern greens and commons; just one common in South Elmham was enclosed in this way (Tate 1952, 225-63).

Although predominantly pastoral farmers, South Elmham yeomen did diversify by having some arable as well as their dairy herds. This diversification, combined with the growing of a variety of crops, helped to make these farmers more self-sufficient than any of their contemporaries and less likely to suffer from the effects of climatic or economic forces beyond their control. One recent writer thinks that High or wood-pasture Suffolk was self-sufficient in corn and grain (Kerridge 1967, 87). It is impossible to give estimates of the proportion of arable to pasture, but there is no reason to think that the former was absolutely insignificant.

The best sources of information about the crops grown are probate inventories and tithe disputes. In 1635 the Norwich consistory court heard a case concerning the tithes of Flixton in South Elmham.⁶ The four witnesses were farming nearly fifty acres of arable in 1633, and their evidence shows that wheat occupied almost half this acreage and was by far the most valuable crop. The other crops grown by these men were, in descending order of value, peas, rye, barley and oats.

Turning to the evidence of probate inventories, it is interesting that every one of the thirteen inventories which includes specific areas of unharvested crops mentions wheat. The following table shows the distribution of growing crops mentioned in inventories.

TABLE 2: GROWING CROPS LISTED IN INVENTORIES

<i>Crop</i>	<i>Number of inventories</i>	<i>Acreage</i>
Wheat	13	34½
Barley	1	6
Rye	4	15
Oats	5	11
Hemp	1	½
Peas	6	12½

The evidence of the South Elmham probate inventories agrees with that of the tithe case in showing that wheat was the most important arable crop. What Table 2 does not show is that hay was the most valuable of the crops grown, with wheat in second place. Ignoring quantities of both growing and harvested crops, the total value of the hay listed in twenty-six inventories is £153 while that of wheat is £121. Hay is a vital crop for dairy farmers and it is not surprising that it holds the pre-eminent position.

South Elmham with its emphasis on hay and wheat contrasts markedly with Cambridgeshire (Spufford 1974, 96-97) and Leicestershire (Hoskins 1950, 171 and Hoskins 1957, 156), where barley, peas and beans were the most important crops. In Myddle in

Shropshire, another dairy-farming region, rye, wheat and barley were the dominant crops, and, as in South Elmham, beans were never mentioned in inventories (Hey 1974, 68). Clearly it is the type of farming practised, rather than the climate or region, which dictates the crops grown; predominantly arable areas such as Leicestershire laid great emphasis on peas and beans, while dairy-farming districts as far apart as Myddle and South Elmham concentrated on the same kind of crops. In the early modern period South Elmham and Myddle were similar farming regions in spite of the differences in their climates. The soil of Shropshire is more varied than that of wood-pasture East Anglia, and less of it is suitable for arable farming. While farming in Suffolk has almost completely changed in character since the late 18th century, in Myddle mixed farming is still practised. During the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars the economic balance favoured corn growing rather than dairying, and this induced most East Anglian farmers to change from pastoral to arable farming, a change that has never been reversed.

In the early modern period the economic balance favoured dairy rather than arable farming, and the benefits that this brought to South Elmham farmers are illustrated by the relatively large size of their dairy herds, the fairly high density of farms and their general prosperity. Livestock is mentioned in just over an hundred out of nearly three hundred South Elmham wills made between 1550 and 1640, and cattle appear far more frequently than any other kind of farm animal. Of course, the absence of any mention of livestock in a will does not mean that the testator possessed none; it is often the less well-off who carefully arranged for the disposal of individual animals. Equally, the animals mentioned in a will cannot be assumed to be all that the testator owned; in fact, the way bequests are phrased frequently makes it clear that they were not.

Pigs, poultry and sheep are far rarer as legacies than are horses, but it is cattle that predominate among bequests of livestock in South Elmham wills. Cows, heifers and calves were particularly popular gifts to grandchildren and godchildren. Cattle herds found in wills range in size from one to forty-two, with an average of nearly eight. Herds in two figures appear in thirty of the wills which mention cattle, and twenty-five of the dairy herds are also two figure ones. The two largest belonged to Jeffrey Bearte, who died in 1555 and bequeathed forty neats, and to John Cressner alias Hoxon, who mentions thirty neats in his will made in 1563.

TABLE 3: DISTRIBUTION OF LIVESTOCK FOUND IN 103 WILLS

	<i>Cattle</i>	<i>Milk neats</i>	<i>Horses</i>	<i>Colts & Foals</i>	<i>Sheep</i>	<i>Pigs</i>	<i>Poultry</i>
Number of wills	94	83	44	10	10	11	10
Percentage of wills	91	80	43	9	9	10	9

Turning to probate inventories, it is possible to be more precise about the actual numbers of livestock owned. Table 4 shows the relative importance of the different kinds of stock, and underlines the evidence of the wills, that cattle played the most important part in the farming economy of the area. Horses and pigs come second, and sheep follow a long way behind. Surprisingly few of the inventories mention poultry, and it can only be assumed that, as their value was small, appraisers often did not bother to assess them.

TABLE 4: PERCENTAGE OF FARMERS POSSESSING DIFFERENT TYPES OF LIVESTOCK

<i>Number of inventories listing livestock</i>	<i>Cattle</i>	<i>Horses</i>	<i>Pigs</i>	<i>Poultry</i>	<i>Sheep</i>
27*	85%	70%	70%	44%	26%

*One other inventory values livestock at over £90, but no details are given.

As they appear in only five inventories, it can safely be said that in this period sheep were not important in this area. The median number of pigs is only five, so it seems likely that pigs were kept for domestic use to provide the household with bacon and ham; most farmers kept pigs, but their numbers per holding were small. Kerridge (1967, 85) says that in East Suffolk large numbers of pigs were reared and fattened in conjunction with dairies, but this does not seem to have been true of South Elmham. As a general rule pig-keeping is combined with dairying so that the pigs can consume the skim milk, but Suffolk hard cheese was made from the skim milk left over from butter making, so there was not the food available for large numbers of pigs.

Although a high proportion of farmers owned horses, the number kept by individuals was not very large, with the possible exception of one man whose horses were valued at forty pounds; as most of the horses were worth two pounds or less, he could have owned a considerable number. Oxen are never listed in the inventories, although a will of 1555 mentions two ploughing oxen, so horses must have been kept mainly for ploughing, carting and other farm work. Of the importance of cattle, and more particularly of dairy cows, there can be no doubt. If South Elmham herd and flock sizes are compared with those in Cambridgeshire (Spufford 1974, 131-32), Lincolnshire (Thirsk 1957, 69-71), Leicestershire (Hoskins 1950, 171 and Hoskins 1957, 158-59) and Shropshire (Hey 1974, 61), it becomes apparent that the largest cattle herds and smallest sheep flocks were to be found in South Elmham. This underlines the importance of dairy farming there, and indicates that livestock were less varied than, for instance, at Myddle in Shropshire, where dairying was combined with sheep rearing.

South Elmham farmers tended to own medium-sized dairy herds, which suggests that there were many moderate-sized farms in the nine parishes. There is practically no difference between the mean and median size of dairy and cattle herds there, which indicates that the distribution of herd size is not distorted by either very large or very small herds.⁷ Thus it was possible for a relatively large number of prosperous dairy farmers to flourish in the area. The dairy herds seem not to have been as large in the Waveney valley as those one writer found in Suffolk (Kerridge 1967, 85); the range in size in South Elmham was from one to thirty-eight, and from one to forty-seven if all cattle are taken into account. On the other hand, the mean size cattle herd was larger than those in areas as varied as Lincolnshire, Shropshire and the Cambridgeshire fens.

It has been said that dairy farming is best suited to the small producer, because it is labour intensive, because the capital outlay is small and because it provides a regular income throughout the year (Thirsk 1967, 672-73). The necessity for regular milking and the making of butter and cheese meant that seasonal fluctuations in labour needs were less than for the arable farmer, and a small labour force could be employed throughout the year. Probate inventories show that the value of dairy utensils, even on a farm with a large number of cows, was not very high. For example, the dairy vessels, churns and so forth of John Vyneor, who died in 1593,

and owned thirty-eight cows, were worth only £4 16s.0d.⁸ Four, or at the most five, people could manage the milking of that number of cows, and it is probable that not all the cows would have been in milk at once. It was usual in summer to keep cows permanently out in the fields, where they were milked, and in yards in winter; or tied up in the fields and fed at mangers as described by Arthur Young (Young 1813, 208). Neat houses, as cowsheds are called in Suffolk, are never mentioned in the pre-1649 wills or inventories, so are unlikely to have existed before that date. Some of the larger farmers had milking yards; a mid-17th-century map of the hundred of Lothingland depicts one such just outside Somerleyton Hall, and the drawing makes it clear that it was no more than a small, fenced enclosure.⁹ In 1593 Stephen Elmy, one of the wealthiest yeomen in South Elmham, encroached on St Michael's common with a milking yard;¹⁰ he lived in this parish, so it may have been near to his house, or possibly it was for the more convenient milking of his cows grazing on the common or in neighbouring fields.

A regular all-the-year-round income from his sales of dairy produce probably placed the dairy farmer in a more secure economic position than the arable farmer, whose fortunes depended on the once-a-year event of harvest. Not all the cows calved in spring; some did so in the autumn, were fed on hay and straw through the winter, and from their milk was produced the Suffolk 'hay' butter and cheese. There is no evidence of turnips being grown and fed to cattle before 1650. Kerridge claims that 'High Suffolk winter dairy produce was unique' (Kerridge 1967, 295), but this cannot be true for at Stiffkey in north Norfolk in the 1590s Nathaniel Bacon was purchasing fresh butter in the dead of winter. The detailed evidence is that it was certainly being produced in South Elmham at the very beginning of the 17th century. A household account book for the winter of 1605-06 contains entries for the purchase of butter, both fresh and salt, and cream in the depth of winter.¹¹ Even when the type of butter is not specified, it is likely to have been fresh, as usually only two or three pints were bought at one time.

Suffolk was long famous for its breed of polled dun cattle, ancestors of the modern red poll, and they were generally acknowledged to be excellent milkers. Cheese was probably made in larger quantities than butter. Some small cream cheeses were made from whole milk, but most were made from skimmed milk; the cream was used for butter. The cheese made from skimmed milk was very hard and was known as Suffolk bang. It has been compared to cannon balls, and has been the subject of many jokes, one of which is that dogs bark at it because it is too hard to bite (Courtine 1973, 231). However, its keeping properties were such that it was ideal for provisioning ships and armies.¹² An order to the constable of South Elmham St Margaret, dated 1 November 1600, commands him to see that his parish provides half a 'waye' of cheese and two firkins of butter for the navy, to be delivered at Walberswick on 10 or 11 November.¹³ Suffolk butter also kept well; it was stored in firkins, probably of fifty-six pounds capacity, and was preserved by the addition of salt and brine. Defoe wrote: 'I have known a firkin of Suffolk butter sent to the West Indies, and brought back to England again, and has been perfectly good and sweet, as at first.' (Defoe 1928, 53).

Wood-pasture dairy farmers were fortunate in producing commodities for which there was an assured market, little affected by economic vagaries and certainly not suffering from the 17th-century depression which did so much harm to corn farmers. Butter and cheese were sold at local market towns, such as Framlingham, Harleston and Bungay; and in the 16th century they were also sold at Stourbridge Fair, held at the end of summer just outside Cambridge. People came to this fair from all over England. As early as 1507, a member of a local family was selling dairy produce there.¹⁴ In Defoe's day Woodbridge was the chief port for shipping cheese and butter, but Dunwich still had some share in this trade. The South Elmham dairy farmers were well placed for this. They were within easy reach of Bungay staithe on the navigable river Waveney, and Halesworth on the Blythe, another navigable river, was only a few miles away.

Thus they had easy access to the ports of Lowestoft and Yarmouth on the one hand, and to Southwold, Walberswick and Dunwich on the other.

An interesting case in the Court of Requests in 1610 concerned a cheese factor, one Thomas Horth of St Peter in South Elmham (Thirsk 1967, 513).¹⁵ Horth and Robert Cooper, a yeoman of South Elmham St Michael, were involved in a dispute over the sale of cheese and butter by the latter to the former in 1609. The case is of interest for the light it sheds on how the cheese mongers operated. In February 1609 Horth visited Cooper and agreed to buy the cheese and butter that his cows would produce during the coming summer. They agreed a price: £1 2s. 6d. for each firkin of butter and £3 8s. 0d. for every 'weighte' of cheese. Horth was to return to weigh, collect and pay for the butter and cheese in August; the total sum involved was forty pounds. Horth was acting for his brothers-in-law, who were London fishmongers, and who, according to him, kept a shop in London for selling butter and cheese. Horth said he was their factor 'in these parts', that is east Suffolk. If this arrangement was a typical one, the wood-pasture dairy farmers had the advantage of having an assured market for their produce at an agreed price arranged before the spring calving.

The income of many family-run dairy farms in South Elmham was augmented by the preparation of hemp for the weaver and, in some cases, by its weaving. Looms and their attachments are seldom valued in inventories at more than one pound each and spinning wheels, tow combs and heckles at only a few shillings, so this by-industry involved little capital investment, yet kept the entire family gainfully occupied throughout the year. Stocking knitting was also an important by-employment in the Waveney valley. The importance of by-industries as one of the main factors which made it possible for wood-pasture regions to support a high density of small farms, which provided their owners with a comfortable standard of living, cannot be over emphasised.

In the Waveney valley linen, not woollens, was the basis of by-industry. Clearly the by-employment favoured in each region was largely determined by the raw material most easily available. Thus in the Cambridgeshire fens the wicker-work industry was quite important, and was based on the suitability of the area for growing osiers (Ravensdale 1974, 57). Both Arthur Young and a modern writer are agreed that hemp was widely grown in the Waveney valley area (Young 1813, 141 and Kerridge 1967, 85), and the former states that the chief district for hemp-growing was a tract about ten miles wide stretching from Eye to Beccles.¹⁶ In fact the concentration of linen weavers and hemp growing stretches further west into the valley of the Little Ouse (Evans, 1984).

Kerridge claims that farmers grew whole fields of hemp, but inventories never mention an area larger than half an acre of growing hemp. As an harvested crop, it was quite valuable, being worth between four shillings and four shillings and sixpence a stone in the early 17th century. Hemp needs no attention after sowing as it smothers weeds, and it is harvested or 'pulled' about three months after sowing, which commonly was carried out in the latter part of April. Arthur Young reckoned that an acre would produce on average forty-five stone of hemp (Young 1813, 144), so it was clearly a crop which would give a good return from a small area; this tends to reinforce the impression that, contrary to Kerridge's view, it was grown in small fields. Small closes called 'Hemmland' are frequently found near farm houses. The preparation of hemp fitted in well with dairying; August, the month when hemp is pulled, is less busy for the dairy farmer than for his arable counterpart, and the later stages of its preparation could be carried out during the slacker winter months (Evans 1984). Arthur Young speaks of dairy maids earning the full amount of their wages by spinning hemp (Young 1813, 144).

It is not possible to carry out for South Elmham the type of analysis of changes in land-holding made, for example, at Chippenham (Cambridgeshire) or Kibworth Harcourt (Leicestershire) (Spufford 1974, 65-68 and Howell 1974, *passim*). No tenement-based surveys

have survived for South Elmham and all that can definitely be said of holdings is that they varied greatly in size, from under ten to more than forty acres. The only evidence that can be cited in attempting to analyse changes in land-holding between 1551 and 1640 is that in court rolls.

The number of tenants (no distinction was made between copyholders and freeholders and many men were both) attorning or paying homage at the first court of a new lord of South Elmham manor, which was the largest in the nine parishes, fell from seventy-four in 1541 to thirty-eight in 1629. At first sight this suggests that engrossing of holdings was taking place, although there is little evidence of it elsewhere in the court rolls. A possible explanation for the fall in the number of attorning tenants is that it was small freeholds rather than copyholds that were being engrossed; sales of freehold property very seldom appear in the court records. Alternatively, it could be that fewer tenants were bothering to attorn; certainly fewer were appearing in person to pay suit of court on other occasions.

The second type of evidence available in the court rolls concerns the numbers of land transfers taking place each year. As the numbers of transactions in the Flixton late Priory court are so small, it was decided to confine this survey to the much busier South Elmham court. The other manors in the nine South Elmham parishes are very small and have left few records.

It has been pointed out that an analysis of court roll land transactions is an unsatisfactory exercise, because the numbers involved are too small to be statistically significant (Spufford 1974, 77).¹⁷ The South Elmham manor court was a big one and there seems to have been a fairly active land market between 1550 and 1640, but even so the average number of sales was only 4.5 per year between 1550 and 1600 and 3.5 between 1600 and 1640. Many of the sales were concerned with small areas of land, sometimes as little as one rood, and look more like the consolidation of holdings than engrossing. On the occasions when a wealthy yeoman bought land to set up younger sons, he was not in fact engrossing, because the land would later be divided up again amongst his heirs. In addition it seems to have been not uncommon for a man to acquire copyhold land, sit on the manor court jury for a few years, and then sell his land and disappear from view. In the absence of other evidence about these men, it is impossible to say at what stage of their careers they were buying and selling land.

In Chippenham in the late 16th century the lord of the manor was buying up copyholds in order to convert them into more profitable leaseholds (Spufford 1974, 75-78), but there is no evidence that this was the case in South Elmham, where the economic strength of the yeoman farmers protected them.

When sales in 1556 and 1637, respectively the years with the highest number of sales before and after 1600, were analysed, there seemed no indication of the sale of whole farms. In the earlier year there were fifteen sales, six of which were by one man. The amounts of land being sold are not given in every case, but, with one exception, the areas stated range from one-and-a-half to two-and-a-quarter acres. The exception is one of John Throckmorton's six sales, and this was of thirty-three acres. Around 1556 this man, a member of a local gentry family, seems to have been selling off his property in South Elmham, but these sales were not due to financial difficulties as the family continued to flourish elsewhere in the neighbourhood. There were nine sales in 1637, all made by different men and all of small plots of land; the acreage ranged from half to seven acres. In these two years, 1556 and 1637, there is little evidence of economic pressures forcing men to sell their farms. Certainly five years in the decade 1555 to 1564 have more than the average number of sales, and it is possible that bad harvests caused some men to sell part of their holdings, but these years also saw a high level of inheritance transactions in the manor court and it seems just as likely that this was the cause of most sales as that the cause was financial difficulties. In fact all those who made small sales of land in 1556 either continued to be

copyhold tenants of the manor, or were men living some way off who had inherited land in South Elmham.

Closely related to the size of farms is the question of inheritance patterns. It can be said at once that there is no sign in South Elmham in the 16th and 17th centuries of borough English or gavelkind. A study of medieval Flixton found no sign of partible inheritance,¹⁸ and there is no evidence for it in the early modern period.¹⁹ However, it was not the custom in all wood-pasture manors that the eldest son should inherit copyholds; in Bramfield, for instance, 'copyhold falls to the younger' (MacCulloch 1976, 32). It has been said that the most usual form of customary tenure in eastern England was copyhold of inheritance (Kerridge 1967, 38), which gave greater security than did any other kind of copyhold, and this is certainly true of South Elmham. In most places copyholds of inheritance descended according to common law, that is to say the land passed to the eldest son, or, when there were no sons, to any daughters as co-heiresses. An examination of the court rolls for Flixton and South Elmham from 1550 to 1640 shows that this was the case in these manors.

Where more than one son was admitted to copyhold land after the father's death, it is usually clear from the entry in the court roll and from the deceased's will, if it exists, that land had been bought, often quite recently, to provide holdings for the younger sons. The family's original copyhold generally passed intact to the eldest son. Naturally enough it was only the richer yeomen who could afford to provide for their younger sons in this way. The Elmy family of St Michael provides a good example. William Elmy the elder, who died in October 1571, left land to all six of his sons.²⁰ Even the youngest son, Henry, was bequeathed over forty acres although, unlike his five brothers, he did not inherit a house as well. William had inherited his original holding from his father, Stephen, in 1537, and entries in the court rolls show that he started buying more land over thirty years before he died. His eldest son, another Stephen, received the land William had inherited from his father and when Stephen died in 1602 he left land to four of his six sons. From the evidence available it seems that none of Stephen's brothers provided land for more than one son. Other men, apparently of equal standing with the Elmy family, preferred to leave their real estate to the eldest son and to give the others fairly substantial money legacies, which could be used to buy land or to set up in a trade.

Historians writing about Leicestershire and Cambridgeshire, for instance, have been able to speak with confidence of the size of the virgate or yardland, but in South Elmham, where as was usual in wood-pasture East Anglia the basic unit was the tenement, it is not possible to do this. Elizabethan surveys of two small South Elmham manors are set out not by tenements, but by geographical location.²¹ Had the contemporary survey of the far larger South Elmham manor survived, it might have been possible to have a clearer idea of the size of the tenements. Such evidence as there is suggests that the South Elmham tenements were in Hammond's words, 'irregular units' (Hammond, 1933, 15-16). A further complication is that some tenements do not lie all in one manor, but are found in two or three manors. The explanation for this must be that the chief manor of South Elmham is of greater antiquity than the smaller ones, which were carved out of it at a later date.

It has been pointed out that in spite of the sub-division of tenements, 'their legal, topographical and tenurial identity was clearly preserved' (Dymond 1974, 199). In South Elmham, as in Walsham-le-Willows, the offices of reeve or hayward and collector were filled not by election, but by rotation of tenements on a seventeen-year cycle. A document, which is probably late 16th-century in date, lists the office-bearing tenements of South Elmham manor.²² The tenements which owed the service of providing the collector were held by seventeen principal tenants and forty-nine other unnamed ones. In the case of the hayward, there were seventeen principal and forty-five other tenants.²³ The fact that thirty-four tenements were held by 128 tenants gives some idea of how much they had fragmented. Entries in the court rolls

show that each year more than one tenement was 'elected' for each of the two offices, and that it was always the tenant of the largest tenement, the 'capital tenement', who actually filled the office. The tenements which supplied the collector were on the whole larger than those responsible for providing the hayward. The following table sets out the sizes of the two sets of tenements.²⁴

TABLE 5: DISTRIBUTION OF OFFICE-BEARING TENEMENTS BY SIZE

	<i>Under 10 acres</i>	<i>10-20 acres</i>	<i>21-30 acres</i>	<i>31-40 acres</i>	<i>Over 40 acres</i>
Collector	1	3	3	9	1
Hayward	3	13	0	1	0

The size of these tenements varied from seven to forty-eight acres, and, if this is their original size, it confirms Hammond's view that when East Anglia was manorialized after the Norman Conquest 'rents and services were fixed on the peasant holdings as they existed' at that time (Hammond 1933, 15-16). The only firm conclusions that can be drawn about the tenements in South Elmham are that they varied greatly in size and were very fragmented, although preserving their unity as legal entities.

The yeomen of South Elmham dominated the life of their community; it was they who filled the parish offices and sat on the manor court juries; they tenanted the greater part of the copyhold land; and they formed the most substantial class in the community. The wills and probate inventories of South Elmham yeomen reveal a high standard of living, and make it clear that they were wealthier than their contemporaries elsewhere in England in diverse ways. They were more generous towards widows; they more often left land to two or more sons; they owned larger herds of cattle; they lived in bigger houses, which were better furnished; they owned more books and were more literate (Evans 1978). There is similar evidence for other wood-pasture parishes.

There was a wide range of wealth and social position within the ranks of the yeomanry which can be paralleled in other areas, such as Myddle where farmers varied widely both in wealth and in the economic success or failure of their careers (Hey 1974, chapter 3). As at Wigston (Leicestershire) (Hoskins 1957, 143), no one family dominated either South Elmham as a whole or its individual villages. There were too many wealthy families for this to happen, and below the leading yeoman families there was a wide stratum of men of middling wealth, whose presence helped to preserve a balance in society. As has been pointed out, 'where there was a large number of small proprietors this fact had also made an indelible imprint on the social structure of the population' (Mills 1972).

South Elmham was an early-enclosed area of pastoral farming with a strong bias towards dairying, but it was probably also self-sufficient or nearly so in grain. A by-industry based on hemp augmented the farming income, and the agricultural techniques used seem to have been advanced by the standards of their day. It is not possible to reach any firm conclusions about the size of farms, but inheritance customs tended to favour the retention of family holdings in the hands of a single heir, and did not encourage excessive fragmentation of holdings. Considering the size of the main manor and the number of its tenants, the volume of sales in the manor courts seems relatively low and certainly not high enough to indicate the decline of the small landholder. The physical geography of the region of Suffolk in which South Elmham lies is such that it is an area equally suited to either corn growing or dairy farming, but in the 16th and 17th centuries the economic balance was such that the latter brought greater profits and was therefore preferred. Dairy farming does not require a great capital outlay, and is suited to relatively small enterprises, thus making possible a fairly high density of farms. The form of

copyhold tenure found in South Elmham, the presence of many freeholders, and the weak manorial structure all encouraged the independence of the yeomen. The evidence concerning changes in the size of the farms and the availability of land is insufficient to reach any very firm conclusions. However, a decline in the economic and social status of the smaller farmers may have occurred later in the 17th century; but if it did happen, there are few signs of it before 1650.

It does not seem that an economic polarization of the community, such as occurred in 17th-century Chippenham (Spufford 1974, 72), had taken place in South Elmham before 1650, although in the absence of contemporary maps or surveys it is difficult to be precise about matters such as engrossing. In Cambridgeshire in the 1660s, the median yeoman farm was ninety-two acres (Spufford 1974, 177), but what evidence is available for South Elmham makes it seem unlikely that the median farm in wood-pasture Suffolk was as large. The South Elmham evidence suggests a community containing a large number of moderate sized farms. A rich dairy farmer needed a much smaller acreage than did an arable one to achieve the same level of wealth. This difference between the yeomen of neighbouring counties underlines the importance of the influence of the type of farming practised on the social structure of the community. South Elmham lay almost in the centre of the wood-pasture region of East Anglia, an area characterized by a large class of yeomen, who were wealthy without necessarily farming a large acreage. In a period when small yeomen farmers were being squeezed out in many areas, this does not seem to have been happening in South Elmham. In conclusion, the yeomen of South Elmham formed the backbone of their community; both socially and economically they were undeniably the most important section of society.

This paper has argued that the dairy farmers of South Elmham were typical of those of wood-pasture East Anglia, and that an economy based on produce for which there was a growing market, and on a flourishing by-industry, enabled them to improve their social and economic position between 1550 and 1650. Dairy farmers suffered far less than did corn-growers from the economic stagnation and other difficulties which plagued much of the 17th century. The 18th century was a less fortunate age for the small, labour-intensive farm, and the coming of the industrial revolution had an inimical effect on the East Anglian linen industry. Thus the rise of the yeomen of wood-pasture Suffolk and Norfolk was relatively short-lived, enduring little more than two centuries, and ended with the decline of these two counties from the position of national economic pre-eminence which they had held for so long.

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NOTES

- ¹ The P.C.C. wills have not been used for this table.
- ² The evidence in this paragraph is drawn from the court rolls of the manors of Flixton late Priory and South Elmham, 1550-1640, S.R.O., HA12/C2/34-37, 41; HA12/C3/14, 16.
- ³ Field walking in South Elmham has shown that many of the surviving hedges are between 400 and 600 years old.
- ⁴ S.R.O. HB24/15.
- ⁵ N.R.O. Houchin 87.
- ⁶ N.R.O. DEP 42, pp. 326-342.
- ⁷ The mean and median size of South Elmham dairy herds is 12.2 and 12, and the figures for cattle herds are 16.8 and 16.5.
- ⁸ N.R.O. INV/9/312.

- ⁹ S.R.O. HD 86/707.
¹⁰ S.R.O. HA12 unlisted 160.
¹¹ S.R.O. HA12 unlisted 49 and N. R. Evans, 'Housekeeping in 1605', *The Suffolk Review*, IV, 165.
¹² In the reign of Elizabeth I, the normal diet of soldiers and sailors included ½lb cheese and ¼lb butter a day.
¹³ S.R.O. FC141/I1/4/1.
¹⁴ S.R.O. HA12 unlisted 85.
¹⁵ P.R.O. REQ2. 393/28.
¹⁶ Frequent references in medieval wills and manorial court records make it clear that hemp had long been grown here.
¹⁷ A review article in *The Journal of Social History*, Fall 1976, disagrees with the view that small numbers are necessarily statistically worthless. I am grateful to Dr M. Spufford for drawing my attention to this review of her book.
¹⁸ Personal communication from John Ridgard.
¹⁹ On a blank page of the South Elmham court book for 1649-65 (S.R.O. HA12/C2/43) someone has written: 'Custome to the eldest'.
²⁰ P.R.O. PCC Carew 11.
²¹ S.R.O. HA12/B1/2/109 and HA12/E1/2/25.
²² S.R.O. HA12/C2/87/1.
²³ An entry in the South Elmham court book for 1649-65 makes it clear that these lesser tenants were to act as helpers to the holders of the offices of collector and hayward.
²⁴ The writer of this document gives totals of 355 acres for the collector and 289 acres for the hayward tenements. In fact the two totals should be 502 and 232 acres. This discrepancy may indicate a difference between customary and statutory acres.

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Abbreviations for MSS

N.R.O. Norfolk Record Office.

S.R.O. Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich branch.

P.C.C. Prerogative Court of Canterbury Wills, now P.R.O., PROB 11.