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**Slide 1 title**

*Memberships of Suffolk farmer’s clubs in the 1840s.*

*Before 1840 local farmers societies in England and Wales comprised of tenant committees led by the landlord, while the national and regional associations were dominated by the establishment. Local farmers met on market days in the local tavern for the farmers’ ordinary, a communal meal sometimes known as the market club, and might have formed the basis of the enormously popular farmer’s club movement of 1840.*

In the course of research into the farmer’s club phenomena of mid nineteenth century England the membership lists of three clubs in Suffolk came to light. Clubs of this sort aimed to widen the participation of small and tenant farmers, who were, at the time vastly under-represented in agricultural organisations. These membership lists presented an opportunity to assess how far that ambition was achieved, and the purpose of this talk is to present some initial results and discuss how these preliminary findings might be developed.

**Slide 2 Young-board, regional/local, poppy correspondent.**

Local farmer’s clubs emerged toward the end of the 1830s, a decade of rural riots in 1830, urban riots in 1831, and the reform act in 1832. It was the owners and tenants of a £50 farm or a £10 business, newly enfranchised by the act, which local clubs sought to enrol.

The mid-1830s saw the collapse of the Central Agricultural Protection Association, the establishment of the anti-corn law league and the creation of the English Agricultural Society, plus the publication of the chartist manifesto. Ideas about agricultural science, economic theory, market data, and tenant rights became sought after by those keen to adopt the modern high farming techniques, including the newly enfranchised tenant farmers.

In the late 1830s Charles Poppy, founding chair of Ashbocking farmer’s club, the first in the country, had stated that farmers’ clubs could spread this information to a “tenfold degree” compared to the national or county societies, a view shared by Robert Harvey of Harleston farmer’s club who believed they were a “perfectly distinct society” and agricultural journalist J.C. Morton who saw farmers’ clubs as “another class of institution”. But what did these phrases mean? What the founders wanted was not only to associate and communicate with a greater *number* of farmers than the regional and national groups could offer, but to a wider *range* of farmers extending further into the social classes, beyond the aristocracy, the gentry and the church. The new local farmer’s clubs of the early 1840s intended to provide education and representation for the small farmer, services not offered by the regional or national agricultural organisations, dominated as they were by the landed interest. In the agricultural press Poppy declared *I detest politics, but we have not excluded agricultural policy from club discussions.*

Poppy’s motives were shaped by his advocacy of high farming, which was expensive, protectionism, which demanded increased yields, and tenant rights, which required better protection for the tenant. These came to a head In 1830 when Poppy suffered a heavy financial loss at the hands of an unscrupulous landlord who reneged on a verbal agreement.

In his 1858 obituary of Poppy, Allen Ransome wrote that, *his case was one among many of the folly of making improvements without security*.

**Slide 3 clubs**

Local farmer’s clubs appeared in Suffolk in the late 1830s and provided the prototype for a network which rapidly spread across England and Wales and flourished for at least a decade. Estimates vary but at its peak the movement numbered about three hundred clubs, based in villages and market towns, across 40 or so counties, with more than ten in Suffolk alone. Even allowing that possibly half of the new clubs folded or merged within a year, at an average membership around 100, something in the region of 15,000 farmers belonged to a local club in the early 1840s. For comparison, by 1840 three thousand prominent agriculturalists had subscribed to The Royal Agricultural Society of England. To achieve Charles Poppy’s ambition of a *tenfold* increase in efficiency farmer’s clubs would collectively have to reach thirty thousand individuals. First indications would suggest that they did.

Harold Fox has suggested these clubs had “attracted a wide range of types of farmer, thereby encouraging the spread of ideas between farming classes” and Nicholas Goddard stressed that their “regular discussion meetings and agricultural libraries” had provided “a ready means of promoting and diffusing information”. So, although it looks as though farmer’s clubs had recruited a diversity of farmers *and* provided accessible educational opportunities, it was still not clear who joined; information which could only be established through a social analysis of club membership lists.

**Slide 4 members**

And now, the membership lists of three active local farmer’s clubs, formed in 1840, have been located in the Suffolk archives, with a total of 344 members. Sources for all three clubs provided names and addresses of members, and for one of them also contained subscription records plus the original recruitment drive mailing list, revealing that membership was stable, subscriptions regularly paid, and also that the recruitment drive was almost one hundred percent successful. Ups and downs were minor, there were a few symbolic resignations and immediate readmissions over political issues, and an occasional surge in applications when an influential visitor was due to speak.

When matched to tithe, census, and trade directory records each member was ascribed by three factors: residence, occupation, and tenure. In addition to the general membership, special attention was given to the leadership sub-set, and also to conspicuous non-members. Together this would allow us to look at the target group, the joiners, the leaders, and non-joiners.

**Slide 5 method**

**Slides 6,7,8 occupations**

1- occupation from self-description.

2- by industrial sectors, primary/secondary/tertiary, borrowed from industrial geography.

3-by purpose

**Slides 9,10,11, tenure**

Adapting the concept of a farming ladder, the second step involved ranking the acreage and tenure of each members’ holding.

1-tenure pie

2-ladder by frequency

3-ladder by individuals

**Slide 12 farm size**

Farm size

Farm size was considered an important factor in the high farming of the 1840s. Contemporary commentators had calculated that the expense of intensive inputs, fertilizer, machinery, drainage, was only justifiable on holdings above 250 acres. In East Anglia average farm size was higher than in the hill farming districts of the west of the UK, and within Suffolk farm sizes were greater and fields were larger in the corn and sheep districts than in the beef and dairy area known as high Suffolk. [[1]](#footnote-1) About half of farms were up to fifty acres, around a quarter were between one and three hundred acres, and nearly a quarter were over 300 acres. Very few were over one thousand acres. These categories may be thought of as small, typical, large, and estate. The small farmers generally combined their husbandry with a “craft or a trade”, the “typical farmer” was the type targeted by agricultural magazines, and the “larger farmer were the high farmers of the period”. The estates were inherited by aristocrats or purchased by magnates. Susana Wade Martins has suggested that in the 1840s “Two hundred and fifty acres or more was needed before high farming was worthwhile”.

**Slide 13 class**

Socio Economic class in the WMFC

**Slide 14 Yeats**

These clubs were very much a male affair, and in the three available samples men outnumbered women by 344 to zero. Women were excluded from the vote by the reform act and were unable to support the farming interest in parliament, and this may have been one reason farmer’s clubs excluded female farmers. Membership criteria generally employed the phrase *prospective members*, but pronouns in the small print were always male. Ipswich journalist John Glyde, in 1850, concluded that official statistics grossly underestimated the number of female farmers and overestimated the number of male farmers. For the Wickham Market area of Suffolk, he claimed “the actual number of female farmers in this union alone is greater than the census papers have returned for the whole county”.

The census data shows that women farmers were rarely recorded as such or as head of the household. Male farmers were consistently represented, often as father and son, even when retired, and always as head of the household, for example Moses Crisp senior and junior of Letheringham. In widowhood a woman might take up the title of farmer, alongside her eldest son, as in the case of Mary Crisp and Thomas Crisp, mother and son of Gedgrave, where Thomas is recorded as head of the household. Some women in all female households were recorded in the census as both farmer and head of household.

But, as Nicola Verdon has said, nineteenth century statistics provide a very misleading picture of the role played by women in agriculture. It was as if the women in the farming community were represented by the men, who were the *joiners* of agricultural organisations. Although not involved in the farmer’s club or the village inn culture, women, along with other groups of non-members, could benefit from the frequent appearance of club reports in the press.

Additionally, as very nearly all of the members surveyed represented a farming related family household comprised of males and females, the reach of clubs could realistically be doubled, or more. This takes the total of agrarians in contact with the farmer’s club movement beyond thirty thousand, Charles Poppy’s original target.

**Slide 15 Jefferies**

In their quest to disseminate the latest agricultural information farmer’s clubs employed two tactics, the lending library and the monthly discussion. The two were connected as the topics discussed invariably were derived from the new farming books which formed the agricultural library.

Clubs expended most of their funds on the latest titles plus regular journal subscriptions, prompting yet further new titles, but even with economies of steam printing books were still prohibitively expensive for the individual, and newspapers remained relatively pricey. The club library provided a means for the cost conscious small business owner to access the latest in agricultural science and engineering. The secretary/librarian/treasurer signed the books in and out at the regular monthly meeting, a somewhat onerous task judging by the scribbled state of the records and the difficulties of recruiting and retaining a librarian. Clubs provided a reading room in a pub or hotel, where printed matter could be consulted weekly, on market day, but staffing difficulties were an obstacle to more extended opening.

Financial accounts reveal club’s expanded their libraries by about twenty books and four journals per year at a cost of £20. Had accumulation continued at this pace for a decade they would have required about fifteen metres of shelving, but it seems likely that initial enthusiasm waned after five years or so under the pressures of cost, administration, and space. A solution adopted by one club was to sell the periodicals to members at the end the year, giving members a bargain and the club additional income. William Shaw, editor and newspaper proprietor, and member of the Harleston club, donated books and newspapers to new clubs to seed their new libraries.

**Slide 16 punch**

In addition to their lending libraries, clubs held monthly discussion evenings, sometimes with expert guest lecturers, and secretaries, who often doubled as librarian, made sure that verbatim reports were printed in the local newspapers and the national agricultural periodicals. As a result, non-members could read the latest accounts of chemical fertilisers, powered machinery, or exploits in drainage without the expense of a five shilling subscription. Furthermore, it was commonplace for specialist agricultural newspapers to be passed around groups of villagers, or made available in pubs, reducing the necessity of a regular newspaper purchase.

These sorts of practices multiplied considerably the readership of local club’s activities, by as many as five times according to some research. By a conservative estimation clubs might be reaching up to one hundred thousand individuals, way beyond the tenfold target set by Poppy only three years previously.

**Slides 17,18,19 leadership**

But what about the leadership? These individuals dominated the origin story, populated the management committee and held the key offices, and they might be expected to present a different profile to the general membership. To investigate this the leadership were analysed using the same method applied to the members, and by some measures the results were very similar, but by others rather different. According to measures one, two, and three, no discernible difference was detected, but by applying the test for socio-economic class it became clear that the leadership group was dissimilar to the general membership.

It was uncommon for landowners and their tenants to be members of the same club, unlike earlier tenant committees or estate clubs run by landlords. Although It was not uncommon for the largest local landlord to be on the committee their tenants were rarely members. This generalisation applies to the gentry type of farmer, who might own outright a few thousand acres, but the owners of great estates, the aristocrat or millionaire industrialist, seems to have had nothing to do with local farmer’s clubs.

Even after Lord Rendlesham was invited to join the WMFC in 1845 he makes no appearance in any of their activities or in a leadership capacity and only one of his twelve tenant farmers was a member. How much of this separation was personal, political or geographical is impossible to know, but clubs did achieve Poppy’s aim of associating without apparent interference from the really big landlords

One aspect of the leadership which becomes clear from the record is their domination of the library books. This was achieved firstly by donating some of the expensive books themselves and therefore having first borrowing rights and also by attending committee meetings, in-between the monthly discussion evenings, giving greater access to the library. It also seems that the committee were often the main purchasers at the end of year auction of journals and newspapers.

It would seem that farmer’s club did effectively reach their target audience, the owner or tenant of typical or larger acreages, without entering the world of the aristocrat or the labourer. Clubs were not acting in isolation though, because the extensive, and expensive, multiple memberships of the leaders provided a connection between clubs, the county associations and the RASE, greatly extending the reach of the RASE. For example, J.J.Mechi, well known farming entrepreneur, writer and banker, belonged to the Royal, the London, and numerous local farmers’ clubs, including the three in this sample.

Other high profile members of Suffolk clubs included the leading tenants, Baker of Norfolk and Fisher Hobbs of Essex. The influential consultant vets, chemists, engineers, and entomologists employed by the Royal also became members and regular visitors to club discussion meetings and made use of local club memberships to collect and disperse data to advance their work.

In Suffolk we see this when Eleanor Ormerod, a pioneering scientist whose brother was member of the Harleston, became RASE chief entomologist and coordinated field work with club members across Suffolk. And we see it with John Henslow, Cambridge Professor of Botany and Geology, organising laboratory experiments and field trials for club members as well as lessons for village schoolchildren and soil fertility research with labourers. In Wickham Market celebrated agricultural engineer Allen Ransome was not only a member but also organised and facilitated local trials and experiments of modern machinery.

In some respects, then, leadership was part of an interaction between local and national groups, the small and the large farmer, the tenant and the owner, which benefitted all parties and which despite his reservations, helped Charles Poppy achieve his goal. It would appear that local clubs were enhanced, not dominated, by estate owners.

**slide 20 county map**

The groups which the farmer’s clubs succeeded in recruiting were the small farmer or artisan, the typical one or two hundred acre tenant and the larger 300 acre farmer. This constituency combined three variations, the aspirant high farmers, the newly enfranchised tenants, and the small business owner, with a degree of overlap. Although they were not all farmers, every member was involved *in* farming, as suggested by Richard Hoyle’s statement that the allegiances of local tenant farmers and the market town residents were generally well aligned.

What also became obvious from the membership lists is that each Suffolk farmer’s club, without making it a rule, drew its members from within a radius of between six and twelve miles. The few UK clubs which did specify a residential limit applied either a six mile or a twelve mile condition; for example, Lincoln City club stated twelve miles and the Sprotborough club in Yorkshire six.

Across East Suffolk clubs were evenly distributed giving most interested parties equal access to the educational resources on offer, in distinct contrast to the pattern in West Suffolk which supported a very sparse club scene. Whatever the possible causes of this contrast it looks as if Charles Poppy’s ambitions were better realised in East Suffolk than West.

Summary

Although they played a part in improving tenant rights, supporting farmers as parliamentary candidates, improving safety at work, establishing agricultural colleges, and promoting farm insurance, It would be too bold to claim, and was beyond the scope of this exercise, that the local clubs of the 1840s made an immediate political, legal, or economic impact.

However, the evidence from this social analysis of membership lists does strongly support the notion that farmer’s clubs did significantly improve access to agricultural education, in the form of scientific knowledge and practical activity for small farmers, tenant farmers, and a wide range of associated agrarian trades. It could also be said they contributed to the new agricultural science.

Whilst the farmer’s clubs of the 1840s were relatively short lived, it could be said that by working to avoid the pitfalls of protectionism, the problems of patronage, and the partisanship of politics, they provided an education to tenant farmers. They also played an important part in the trajectory of agricultural organisations, providing lessons in membership, leadership, and non-membership.

**Slide 21 Young**

Conclusion

Did farmer’s clubs widen participation?

The answer is yes, in both quantity and quality, farmer’s clubs achieved Charles Poppy’s ambition of a ten-fold uplift on existing organisations, in fact far exceeded it. Compared to the RASE local clubs enrolled a greater number of members, from a wider range of social and economic classes, with a more eclectic mix of occupations, and through their activities provided accessible agricultural education. Although this success was partly attributable to the outreach they provided to the national groups, farmers clubs undoubtedly demonstrated the benefits for the farming interest of associating locally.

Thankyou

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)