From Farming to Food:
Fifty Years in Lincolnshire History

Joan Thirsk

I have been reminded that English Peasant Farming was published in 1957, and it is perhaps a timely moment, forty years on, to see the book in perspective, and take stock of the research that lies ahead. It may also be of historical interest to explain how it came to be written.

The book was inspired by work that was published in 1945 and 1951 by W. G. Hoskins on farming in Leicestershire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He was using probate inventories more systematically than anyone before, and identifying the farming specialties of that county and the relative wealth of its different rural classes. His work was making a deep impression on scholars working on agricultural history. They were few in number at that time, but they had the support of a notable scholar, R. H. Tawney, who had published The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century as long ago as 1912, but was still teaching and conducting research seminars in the University of London. At the same time the Clapham Committee was considering the future development of studies in economic and social history. As a result of its report, money was allocated to promote further research in that field, and G. D. H. Cole, a member of the committee, happened to mention to Hoskins that some money was still available; would he like to suggest a project?

Hoskins was aware of the great wealth of archive material in Lincolnshire, then housed at Exchequer Gate in Lincoln, in the charge of Joan Varley and Dorothy Williamson (now Owen). So he proposed a study of Lincolnshire agriculture starting in 1500. The Department of English Local History had been set up in 1948 at the University College of Leicester, and Hoskins was its head and only member. So a post was now advertised, by the Department, for a Senior Research Fellow in Agrarian History who would undertake the research in Lincolnshire.

I had completed a Ph.D. thesis in 1950 under Professor R. H. Tawney on the sale of confiscated royalist lands during the Interregnum, and Tawney had recommended me when Hoskins, as Editor of The Victoria History of the County of Leicester, consulted him in his search for a writer on Leicestershire agrarian history, 1540-1590. I agreed to write that chapter, and had finished the work when the chance arose to work on the related subject in Lincolnshire. I applied for the fellowship and was appointed.

The project could not have better fitted in with my own sympathies. My main interest was moving positively towards rural history, even though I was born and bred in London. I also had long had an instinctive curiosity for the social differences between local communities. I had been deeply impressed by a stay as a teenager with a mining family, relations of a schoolfriend, in Coalville, Leicestershire. My London school had been evacuated to Lincolnshire in 1939, and the school, in the first two years, had moved from Uppingham to Grantham, and then to Stamford. I was billeted with families from five different walks of life, and, through cycling around the county, had come to know it, and absorb its local, social and economic diversity.

As it turned out, Lincolnshire's agrarian history greatly sharpened my perception of local differences, and they have remained ever since a central interest in all my research and writing. In contrast, when working on the county of Leicestershire, Hoskins had not separated any regions. Admittedly, the differences within that county are not as striking as in Lincolnshire, but I am sure that, if I had been working in the same area, I would have made distinctions between its forests, wolds and vale. In Lincolnshire, however, the differences between its regions were too striking to be overlooked.

In the event, I had a free hand in shaping my Lincolnshire research for, before I had taken up my fellowship at Leicester in October, 1951, Hoskins had accepted an invitation to Oxford as Reader in Economic History. H. P. R. Finberg was appointed to the headship in local history in his place, and, on setting up a series of Occasional Papers in English Local History, Finberg wrote the first two that were published, one on 'The local historian and his theme', and the other listing 'The early charters of Devon and Cornwall'. My first piece of Lincolnshire work on 'Fenland farming in the sixteenth century' became the third publication in 1953, and my book on all Lincolnshire's farming regions, carrying the story up to 1914, was published in 1957.

I have recently re-read the introduction to that book for the first time in decades, and am struck by the way it captures the mood of research at that time, and also expresses my still strong attitude to the scope of agricultural history and its sources. My views since then have hardly changed. I was intent in the 1950s on taking good samples from all the farming regions, and I compiled simple statistical tables to show how I arrived at my generalisations. But I was equally concerned to find other contemporary, supporting evidence, in narrative accounts and in personal detail, and to keep my account in contact with identifiable people; one kind of evidence, the statistical, which since then has sometimes come to dominate the scene, was not allowed to stand alone without the other. I remain fervently anchored to that way of writing history.

The completion of the Lincolnshire book demonstrated the realistic possibility of conducting further research that would delineate all the farming regions of England: it might even identify similarities of experience that would bring together scattered regions and social types and so reveal a larger, but subtly differentiated, national mosaic of agricultural development. It led H. P. R. Finberg to put forward the plan for The Agrarian History of England and Wales that would run from prehistory to 1939. I undertook to edit, and partly write, volume IV on the period 1500-1640, and so the analysis of regional differences that had been promulgated in the proposal. Now thirty years on, that project is almost complete in eight volumes, and is expected to be finished and in print by the year 2000. Its broader influence in documenting the diversity of our farming regions may be discerned in the enhanced appreciation that is officially bestowed on the variety of our rural landscapes and their social and economic diversity. The publications of the Countryside Commission and of Common Ground are notable in this respect. Behind them, we may not unreasonably spot some of the lurking influences of the Lincolnshire story.

The generalities in English Peasant Farming are capable of further refinement from many different points of view and the work of local historians is constantly shedding, and will continue to shed, fresh light on the social and economic content and explanation of agricultural change, and the chronological sequences that are locally idiosyncratic. One of the greatest gaps in our knowledge at present concerns the distribution of land among different ranks of landowners and of tenants. A clearer regional analysis, reaching back well before the first agricultural censuses which started in 1866, would illuminate an aspect of farming history that influenced both specialities and social patterns. My own work, however, has taken me in other directions, and fresh light on the Lincolnshire experience
has been shed for me by the changes that have had to be made to farming strategies since about 1980. I no longer see 1914 as a significant turning point, but would prefer to have signalled 1880 or 1939. Other changes in perspective are explained in my latest book, entitled Alternative Agriculture: A History from the Black Death to the Present Day. It not only suggests a somewhat different chronological division of England's agricultural history in the long term that makes better sense both nationally, and in Lincolnshire, but also probes deeper layers of meaning in some distinctive features of the county's farming history, especially in the fenland in the preference for small farms, the longstanding attachment to vegetable cultivation, and the growing of hemp and woad, both of which crops disappeared between sixty and a hundred years ago, seemingly for ever, but which could return again.

My own stock-taking of England's and Lincolnshire's diversified regional history has moved me on in the last two or three years from agriculture to the food eaten by the inhabitants. No agricultural historian can work on food production without speculating also on the foods eaten by local people. It is true that the market looms largest when we survey the foodstuffs grown on the farm to be sold for cash, and we have reason to be impressed by the items that were carried long distances out of Lincolnshire, butter in 1633-34, for example, to Rotterdam, Hamburg, Bordeaux, and even Spain; rapeseed (food for livestock, not for people) in 1634-40 to Holland and France; goose walking to London in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; and celery carried to Sheffield in the late nineteenth century. But the regional specialties must also have featured noticeably in local diets.

A splendid account of the food of Lindsey was made in 1985 by Eileen Elder, offering also valuable insights into the differing content of food in other parts of the county. But generally historians of food have yet to absorb fully the relationship of agriculture to their subject, whether seen in an analysis by region or by class. The eels that were found by the thousand in the fens, for example, gave a different flavour to the meals of fenlanders from the food eaten on the wolds, where sheep (with some rabbits) yielded the bulk of the meat. In 1940 I was struck by the liking in south Lincolnshire for pork and pork products, having heard it alleged that Lincolnshire had more pig clubs than any other county. In England in the late nineteenth century, I see it as an old tradition, and wonder if it has a differentiated history within the county. Was pork meat equally conspicuous among peasant farmers throughout the county, or was it a stronger feature in the regions with small farms (principally, the fens) and perhaps in Kesteven also where more woodland survived than elsewhere and could have served to fatten pigs in autumn? It is worth noticing in this connection that Nick Lyons's admirable account of The Pig in North Lincolnshire focuses attention on some suggestive evidence from these two parts of the county. The samphire of the Lincolnshire marshes was eaten fresh by marshlandiers, but it can only have reached as far as the dwellers on the Lincolnshire cliff if it was pickled. Some gateway certainly managed to savour it that way by a special effort: Sir William Petre at Ingatestone in Essex in Elizabeth's reign brought in samphire in barrels from the coast, and the barrels imply pickling. As for bread, I do not recall seeing any signs of rye loaves in Lincolnshire in the protean inventories of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, though they are actually named and counted in some inventories in parts of Yorkshire. But Eileen Elder cites rye as the principal cereal grown in Messingham in Lindsey in the later nineteenth century (and doubtless much earlier too), intended for domestic consumption, whereas the wolds peasants are said to have lived on barley bread, while the fenlanders made theirs of peas and oats. (Does this preference for oats in the fens explain why they occasionally had to be imported from Boston from Amsterdam, and once from Scotland?) These distinctively local food practices are significant in our history of diet, and deserve to be separated from the easy generalisation that people preferred always to eat wheaten bread, or the more correct statement that they ate a mixture of cereals, namely mealin, which consisted of mixed wheat and rye, or otherwise barley. More subtly could also be introduced into our assessment of these tastes of the past, for as Eileen Elder has pointed out, wheat was valued for strength, barley for its sweetness and rye for its keeping qualities.

Much more could be deduced about the foodstuffs and cooking habits of different classes and different regions if we once asked the right questions and more carefully scrutinised in this regard such varied documents as household papers, letters, diaries and probate inventories. The relevant information is often indirect, but from many slender clues a firmer framework could begin to emerge. Some inventories, for example, show the equipment for making bread in a bread trough, for salting meat in another trough and vessels for brewing ale. Other inventories belong to people who seem to have lived mostly on potage, stews and porridge since no signs of the equipment for baking appear. Such a suggestion is further supported by the remark of Maurice Barley that many old houses show no signs of an oven. Oven cooking, then, depended on occasional recourse to the village baker, assuming that the village had a bakehouse, while the dwellings in hamlets on isolated farms could bake only in the hot ashes of an open fire.

One of my questions awaiting a full answer from the Lincolnshire documents concerns the supply of salt in the kitchen, for flavouring and for preserving meat. The Lincolnshire coast had had many salters in the Middle Ages, and the commercial fattening of beef cattle in the marshland plainly maintained the demand for salt thereafter. The flood of 1570 is said by Holnish to have ruined the Lincolnshire salters, and although it undoubtedly wrecked some when storms shifted the currents, our documents show others being created in the later sixteenth century when silting began in new places and invited embanking. It is true that one document actually states that salt-making in Lincolnshire ended with the accession of James I, as though, by that very fact, a Scottish trade in the commodity had been stimulated at the expense of Lincolnshire's own salt-makers. Certainly, the Boston port entries bear out that suggestion by showing a steady stream of vessels bringing salt from Kirkcaldy on the Firth of Forth almost monthly from 1602 onwards. But the trade did not last. Salt from Scotland had faded away by the 1630s, and totally disappeared by 1640. Christopher Sturman argued convincingly that Newcastle expanded the scale, and cheapened the cost, of its salt by using iron pans, and burning coal rather than peat for its fuel: so it became the nearest, cheapest supplier. Lesser quantities of sea salt were imported from Spain and France via Flushing and Amsterdam. But alongside these supplies from salters, another source has to be accommodated from the mines of Droitwich, Northwich and Nantwich. They were producing more and more salt in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, also using iron pans for boiling the brine, and coal rather than wood for firing. What role did rock salt play in Lincolnshire kitchens?

People were finicky about the flavours of different kinds of salt for different purposes: rock salt was deemed more searching and fiery, whereas French buy salt was thought sweeter for preserving meat. Rock salt was whiter, and that was considered a virtue, but it was also dearer. The poor could buy grey salt, swept up from the floors of brine pits, though it contained many impurities; and it may not have been on sale as far away as Lincolnshire. One of the essential elements in our daily food plainly merits more study.

What of the fats used in cooking? Animal fat is the most common in the cookery books, but did the growing of more and more rapeseed, in the seventeenth century in Lincolnshire lead to its use in cooking? We have hitherto assumed that it was used only for industrial purposes, so I was startled to discover that Robert May, who was a cook in grand households including those of the Countess of Kent and the Earl of Castlehaven, gave one recipe in his cookery book of 1660 for sturgeon, cooking
pieces in a deep kettle of rape oil. Was this just an isolated instance in a rich family’s kitchen or did it betoken more common use among ordinary folk?

The recipe book of Robert May, and, indeed, others of the same century show the markedly liberal use of imported currants, raisins and sugar. On the other hand, the Boston port books between 1601 and 1640 are far from giving prominence to these items. Dried fruits and spices always arrived indirectly, via Rotterdam or Amsterdam. Prunes, figs and raisins came only in modest quantities. Even smaller was the supply of mace (12 lb in one vessel), cloves (12 lb), ginger (24 lb), nutmegs, cinnamon (20 lb), aniseed (28 lb). None of these items can have reached far beyond the kitchens of gentlemen. Currants, on the other hand, which were shipped to England from Cork in such large quantities in the early seventeenth century that the Greeks thought they must be used in dyeing or for feeding pigs, were much more conspicuous. A vessel from Rotterdam in January 1628 brought to Boston twenty-one and a half hundredweight of currants altogether, packed in six separate consignments. This item may well have entered the kitchens of many Lincolnshire townswomen, some wives of yeomen too, and so made many ordinary working people familiar with the cheesecakes, buns and mince meat that regularly used currants in the recipe books of gentility families.

Probably, a more satisfying picture than the above generalities will come from a closer analysis of all the probate inventories of a single place. The volume of probate inventories for Cleex by R. W. Ambler, and B. and L. Watkinson, covering the years 1536-1742, gives that opportunity, and assembles some significant first impressions. Many households possessed brewing vessels and malt querns, and evidently routinely made their own beer or ale. But bread troughs were totally absent (unless one batch served that purpose). It seems likely that Cleex people baked smaller quantities of bread than those requiring a trough, and took their loaves to be baked in a common oven, or baked them in the ashes on the hearth.

The inhabitants of Cleex possessed plenty of pots and pothooks. Also conspicuous in their houses were milk vessels and dairy products, suggesting a local diet that was relatively rich in milk or whey, along with butter and cheese. So porridge and pottage were probably the mainstay at most meals, and the bacon which often hung in the roof routinely afforded a modest slice of meat, cut off to flavour the pottage, reserving goose meat for a very special treat. On meatless days, local fishermen could provide fish, notably herring, and oysters may have been eaten occasionally. But Cleex people may not have seen much mutton or beef; at least, no references to it in salted form appears in the inventories, though no direct inference can safely be transferred from that fact to the eating of fresh meat. A search for other classes of documents is needed to give a better guide to all the meats that were available, including that from rabbits, wildfowl and the poacher’s venison.

The probate inventories of one village give a glimpse of the food history of people living in marshland country. It does not carry us far, but it does show how the subject of local diets deserves further exploration. A whole shelf full of books on food history has been assembled in the last five years, suggesting that the subject commands wide interest. The variety of Lincolnshire’s landscape and farming regions challenges us to look more closely into this mirror of a local society’s lifestyle, and perhaps even penetrate to a better understanding of class, as well as local, differences in food habits. I suspect that W. G. Hoskins, the son and grandson of Exeter bakers, and a connoisseur of good food, would have smiled on such a prospect.

Notes
1. The reminder came from the editor, Christopher Sturman, and the original text of this essay greatly benefited from his helpful comments before his sad death.
10. Nick Lyons, The Pig in North Lincolnshire (Scunthorpe, 1983). However, this author is much more cautious about giving a total picture of Lincolnshire food in this period.
15. Robert May, The Accomplish’d Cook or the Art and Mystery of Cookery (Facsimile of 1683 edn, Totnes, 1994), p.368. It may have been easier to obtain a large quantity of deep fat by using oil rather than animal fat, and the alternative, olive oil, would have given a different flavour and been considerably more expensive. After frying, the cooked fish pieces were to be pickled in fishkins containing wine, vinegar and spices.
18. Among recent publications are Peter Brears and others, A Taste of History, 1000 Years of Food in Britain, (1993); P. W. Hammond, Food and Feast in Medieval England (Stroud, 1993); Terence Scully, The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages (Woodbridge, 1995). On the broader European scene, see, for example, Massimo Montanari, The Culture of Food (Oxford, 1996); Gillian Riley, Renaissance Recipes (San Francisco, 1993); Magnonelle Toussaint-Samat, History of Food (Oxford, 1992).