

# Sussex Archæological Society

## SOME EVIDENCE OF A REDUCTION IN THE ACREAGE OF CULTIVATED LANDS IN SUSSEX DURING THE EARLY FOURTEENTH CENTURY

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The *Nonarum Inquisitiones* for Sussex indicate that land had gone out of cultivation during the early fourteenth century in at least 52 of the 271 parishes whose returns have been published in transcription.<sup>1</sup> Some 6,000 acres which had once been cultivated were recorded in 1341 as lying untilled and a further amount of some 4,000 acres had been flooded by the sea.

The *Nonarum Inquisitiones* relate to a grant by Parliament to Edward III in 1342, to assist him in his wars, of one-ninth of the value of corn, wool and lambs produced in the realm. The value of these items was assessed, parish by parish, from evidence given by groups of parishioners under oath. The inquiries were conducted in the early months of 1342 but related to agricultural production during 1341. Because the ninth was assessed after the tithe had been taken, it was in fact one-ninth of nine-tenths of the total value of lay agricultural production and therefore identical with the tithe of these three items (corn, wool and lambs). As a guide, therefore, the jurors who compiled the parish returns had before them an assessment of one-tenth of clerical incomes in 1291, the taxation of Pope Nicholas IV.<sup>2</sup> The jurors were required to explain the discrepancy between the old and new values. Discrepancy there inevitably was, for clerical incomes included more than the tithe of corn, wool and lambs. In addition, there was the value of glebe and monastic holdings, the revenue from the small tithes of cider, flax, hemp, pigs, geese and poultry, together with oblations, mortuary fees and other items. Some discrepancy, however, arose from changed agricultural conditions, most notably a reduction in the acreage of cultivated lands between 1291 and 1341. In many instances, the value of the ninth in 1341 was lower than that of the tithe in 1291 in part because *terre jacent inculte et seminari solebant*.

<sup>1</sup> *Nonarum Inquisitiones in Curia Scaccarii*, ed. by G. Vanderzee (Record Commissioners, 1807), pp. 350-94; Anonymous, 'The Inquests of Ninths, 1340-1' in *Sussex Notes and Queries*, vol. 2 (1928-9), pp. 250-1; W. H. Blaauw, 'Remarks on the Nonae of 1340, as relating to Sussex' in *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, vol. 1 (1848), pp. 58-64.

<sup>2</sup> *Taxatio Ecclesiastica Angliae et Walliae auctoritate Papae Nicholai IV circa 1291*, ed. by J. Caley and S. Ayscough (Record Commissioners, 1802).

The amount of untilled land in each Sussex parish was usually recorded in acres, sometimes in carucates and virgates, and sometimes in vague terms. It has therefore been possible to construct a map, based on the *Nonarum Inquisitiones*, depicting the approximate location and, in many instances, the acreage of land recorded as having gone out of cultivation between 1291 and 1341 (Fig. 1). This is not the first time that the 1341 returns for Sussex have been represented cartographically. In 1931, R. A. Pelham published a map showing the 1341 valuations of corn, wool and lambs in each parish, which demonstrated the overwhelming predominance of corn growing even among settlements in the chalk-zone, long-regarded as primarily a sheep-raising region.<sup>1</sup> Pelham also used the valuation of wool to estimate the number of sheep in each parish in Sussex in 1341: he constructed a map showing the distribution of sheep in the county in relation to its geology, demonstrating that there was a marked concentration of sheep on the South Downs and on the coastal plain around Chichester.<sup>2</sup> E. M. Yates has more recently shown that there was in western Sussex a positive relationship between the values of corn, wool and lambs in 1341 and soil fertility. He has produced maps showing that the highest valuations were recorded in parishes on the most fertile soils, the lowest valuations in parishes on the least fertile soils.<sup>3</sup> In these studies, only incidental reference was made to the decline in values since 1291 because of a reduction in the cultivated area.

This aspect of the returns was investigated in the Weald by J. L. M. Gulley.<sup>4</sup> This unpublished study includes a map showing changes in prosperity in the Kent and Sussex Weald between 1291 and 1341, and Gulley's conclusion is of great interest. He found that in some instances (Hellingly, Ticehurst, Heathfield, Burwash), parishes which included uncultivated land in 1341 had declined in their tax-paying capacity during the previous 50 years. At Hooe and Ninfield not only had marshes been inundated but upland arable lay untilled because of the poverty of parishioners and the total valuation in both parishes had fallen. In other parishes, Gulley found that the existence of untilled land was not always indicative of a declining prosperity. At Itchingfield, where over 350 acres lay uncultivated in 1341, the valuation was higher than in 1291 and this was true also of Rudgwick, where over 300 acres lay untilled, and of four parishes (Brede, Icklesham, Pett and Fair-

<sup>1</sup> R. A. Pelham, 'Studies in the historical geography of medieval Sussex' in *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, vol. 72 (1931), pp. 157-184.

<sup>2</sup> R. A. Pelham, 'The distribution of sheep in Sussex in the early fourteenth century' in *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, vol. 75 (1934), pp. 128-135.

<sup>3</sup> E. M. Yates, 'Medieval assessments in north-west Sussex' in *Trans. of the Inst. of Brit. Geographers*, vol. 20 (1954), pp. 75-92 and 'The Nonae Rolls and soil fertility' in *Sussex Notes and Queries*, vol. 15 (1958-62), pp. 325-8.

<sup>4</sup> J. L. M. Gulley, 'The Wealden landscape in the early seventeenth century and its antecedents', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London (1960), pp. 345-8 and 504-7.

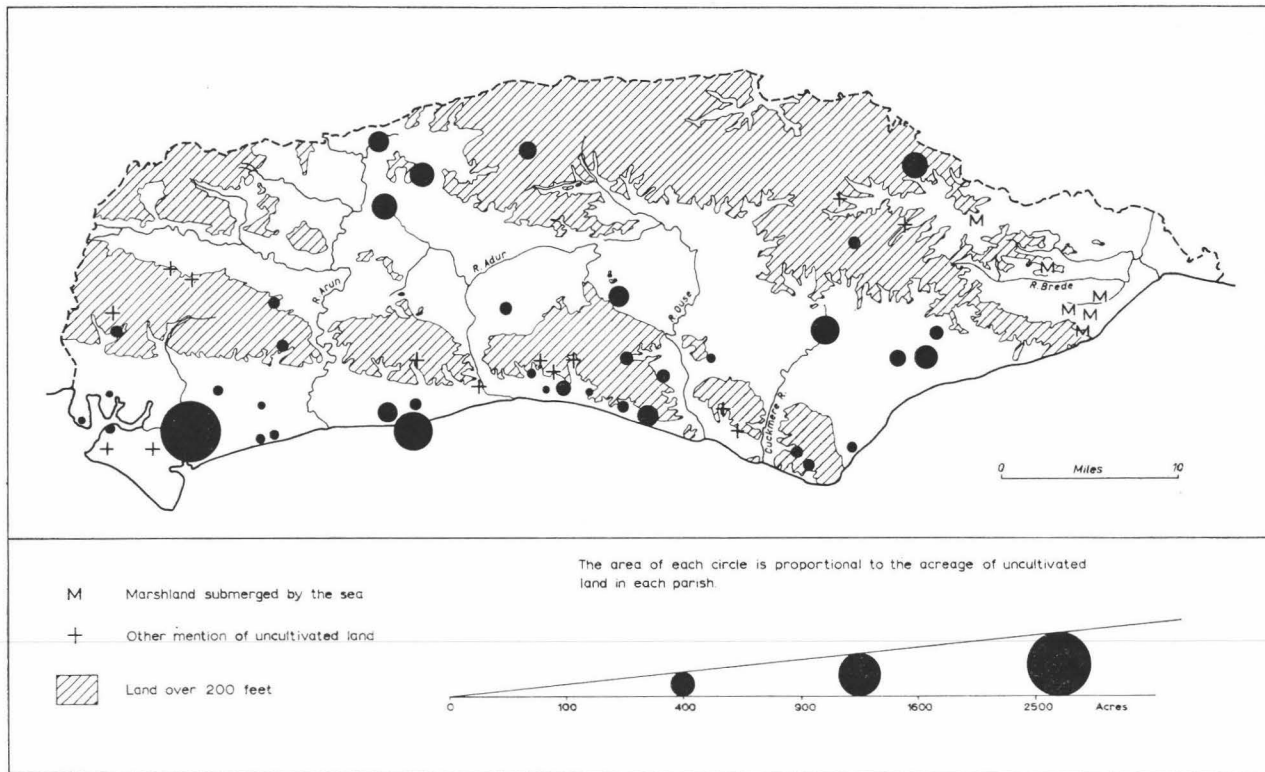


FIG. 1

light) which had lost land to the sea. There was no significant change in prosperity, 1291-1341, at Etchingham and Mayfield, which had lands untilled, nor at Salehurst, Wartling and Guestling, where land lay submerged. On the other hand, parishes like Pulborough had declined in their valuation though their returns made no mention of land going out of cultivation. In the two parishes where untilled land was specifically attributed to poverty, the valuation had declined; but land went out of cultivation for other reasons, many less connected with general prosperity—hence the variable relationship between untilled land and general prosperity. In at least five instances, land had been lost by imparking; and in Burwash, supplementary documentation shows that while some land reverted to waste, other was newly enclosed. Gulley concluded: 'It is thus hardly possible to regard the scattered instances of *terra frisca* in the 1341 returns as the first signs of a general decline; the period between 1291 and 1341, the early fourteenth century, was one of general stability in the condition of Wealden agriculture.' Gulley's perceptive study thus serves as a caution against taking all the instances of untilled land as being indicative of declining prosperity.

The map (Fig. 1), however, shows that in 1341 there were far fewer instances of untilled lands in the Weald of Sussex than elsewhere in the county. It suggests, in fact, that the stability of Wealden agriculture was not paralleled throughout the county. In extra-Wealden Sussex, most instances of uncultivated lands were in two locations: along the coast and around the South Downs.

In addition to the submergence by the sea of unspecified amounts of marshland in six parishes on the Brede and Rother river systems in eastern Sussex,<sup>1</sup> a further 3,790 acres of land, together with other lands of unknown acreages, were recorded in 1341 as having been flooded since 1291. At Hooe, in the Pevensey Levels, 400 acres had been flooded; in Bishopstone, at the seaward end of the Ouse gap, unspecified lands had been submerged.<sup>2</sup> But incursions by the sea had been most frequent and extensive along the Chichester coastal plain: from Brighton westwards, land had been lost to the sea in 14 parishes, the amounts involved ranging from 20 acres at Chidham through 150 acres at Hove to 2,700 acres at Pagham.<sup>3</sup> Altogether, some 4,000 or more acres of agricultural land in Sussex had been inundated. This reduction in the acreage of cultivated

<sup>1</sup> The six parishes were Brede, Fairlight, Guestling, Icklesham, Pett and Salehurst: G. Vanderzee, *op. cit.*, pp. 352-3 and 372-3.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 358 and 371.

<sup>3</sup> The 14 parishes were, from east to west, Brighton (40 acres submerged), Hove (150 acres), Aldrington (40 acres), Portslade (60 acres), Lancing (land), West Tarring in Broadwater (land), Middleton (60 acres), Barnham (40 acres), Felpham (60 acres of land and 40 acres of pasture), Pagham (2,700 acres), Sidlesham (land), West Wittering (land), Chidham (20 acres) and West Thorney (20 acres of arable and 20 acres of pasture): *ibid.*, pp. 357, 360, 366, 368, 369, 385, 386 and 389.

lands must be ascribed largely to natural disasters rather than considered as indicating the onset of any general retrenchment in agriculture—although neglect of drainage channels and embankments might have been a factor facilitating the flooding.

Around the South Downs, the *Nonarum Inquisitiones* show that land had been abandoned for a variety of reasons. At Friston and Eastdean, where a total of 200 acres lay untilled, a contributory factor was fear of attacks by the French.<sup>1</sup> At Ovingdean, 100 acres lay waste, destroyed by rabbit burrowing.<sup>2</sup> A cause more generally cited by the local jurors was soil poverty: at Iford 110 acres lay untilled partly *propter debilitatem terrarum* and at Hangleton many lands were *steriles*.<sup>3</sup> Soil poverty was also called to account at Bepton, Cocking, Heighton Street and Streat.<sup>4</sup> But the most commonly cited reason for the abandonment of arable lands was the poverty of parishioners, associated in some places with a lack of tenants. At Goring, in addition to 150 acres destroyed by the sea, some 900 acres, including part of the demesne, lay unsown *propter defectu hosebondrie et propter impotentiam tenentium*; at Hooe in addition to land flooded by the sea, one-third of the upland arable lay untilled *pre defectu et paupertate parochianorum*; at Stoughton 100 acres lay uncultivated because some of the tenants had gone and others were impoverished.<sup>5</sup> Poverty of tenants was called to account for abandoned lands in 11 other parishes<sup>6</sup> and it may also have been a cause in some of the inland parishes whose returns give no reason at all for the contraction of their cultivated areas. In Sussex as a whole, the *Nonarum Inquisitiones* record 5,619½ acres of formerly cultivated land as lying untilled. A further 9 carucates, 7 virgates and various unspecified lands were in a similar condition. Altogether, some 6,000 or more acres of agricultural land had been abandoned during the half-century before 1341, some of which lay untilled because tenants had become either poorer in resources or fewer in numbers.

The *Nonarum Inquisitiones* for Sussex give a clear picture of the rising level of the sea in the early fourteenth century; but they also provide a glimpse of the receding tide of medieval land colonisation.

<sup>1</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 354-5.    <sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 384.    <sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 384-5.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 360, 361, 376 and 381.    <sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 371, 389 and 390.

<sup>6</sup> The 11 other parishes were Billingshurst, Eastdean, Falmer, Friston, Iford, Ninfield, Patcham, Rottingdean, Sutton, Up Marden and West Blatchington: *ibid.*, pp. 354, 355, 358, 364, 371, 384, 385 and 388.