

A HUMAN TRAGEDY of fatal proportions is being played out in Britain's countryside.

The recession is pushing many farmers to the brink of suicide. Their isolation and financial hardship (UK farm incomes crashed by 14% last year) has alarmed the agricultural industry. At least three farmers a week are killing themselves, making a suicide rate second only to the medical profession.

Nine volunteers are manning a Gloucestershire helpline, for Cotswold farmers, 24-hours a day. The other side of this state of helplessness, however, is a cosseted life of luxury and security, in which some farmers are receiving over £70,000 (\$119,000) from the EEC for doing nothing.

This anomalous situation exposes the social and political tensions that flow from a distortion of the market for food.

- In the good times of the mid-1980s, farmers were enticed into buying land at inflated prices. Then the Tory government panicked and raised interest rates - which made it impossible for many farmers to finance their mortgages.

Trapped by the financial squeeze, many are confronted with suicide as the only alternative to the shame of not maintaining the farming traditions that have been in their families for generations. One of them, Hampshire farmer Robert Biggs, 52, killed his wife Christine with a shotgun and then turned a pistol on himself after writing a suicide note. His final message to Britain's Prime Minister declared; "There is no recession Mr Major - or is there? Open your eyes."

- Other farmers, however, have benefitted from the Common Agricultural Policy's attempt at cutting back surplus production in the guise of nature conservancy. This involves the receipt of large annual sums in return for agreeing to set-aside land from production.

In England, 70 farmers received more than £30,000 under this scheme. Six of them, and one in Scotland, receive over £70,000 a year, reveals Dr. David Clark, the Labour Party's agricultural spokesman in Parliament.

But their windfall does not stop there. Having agreed not to farm the land, the farmers are free to establish other money-spinning ventures - like

# ALCHEMY

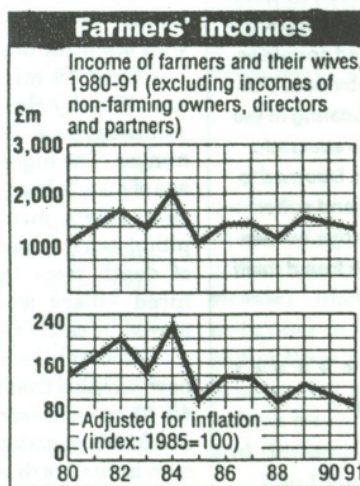
## in the Countryside

by Ian Barron

livery stables, stud farms or golf courses - on their land. This further increases their incomes!

The output of grain, however, has not been curtailed. Although 400,000 acres - 4% of cereal land - will be out of production by the end of the fourth year of the set-aside programme, output did not decrease. Farmers produced 22.7m tons last year - the same level as output in 1989.

Why? Explains Dr. Clark: "Farmers are taking out of production only the most marginal land on which cereal growing was difficult anyway." There was no rule to forbid them intensifying production on their better quality land!



But the windfalls turned other farmers - those who still have to work for their money - green with envy. One victim of their animosity was Cambridgeshire farmer Roger Everdell, who withdrew all his land from production in return for £80,000 a year (£80 an acre).

Mr. Everdell took pride in watching sparrowhawks return to his idle land for the first time in 30 years - one of the objectives of the "green" policies of the EEC. His neighbours, however, bitterly objected when they saw

weeds flourishing in his fallow fields.

That did not deter Mr Everdell, however. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds supported his application for extra payments of up to £48 an acre from the Department of the Environment, which was dish-ing out money under its Countryside Premium Scheme to make land even "greener."

The human tragedy in Britain, however, is multiplied many times over, when the global consequences are examined.

The world is on the verge of a serious political crisis induced by the protectionism afforded to farmers in Europe and North America. The GATT talks - which are aimed at liberalising world trade - are about to fail, because the EEC refuses to accede to requests for concessions from the USA.

But the heaviest price is being paid by the marginal soil tillers in the Third World. They cannot compete on the world markets, where the supply and price of food is distorted by protectionism in Europe and North America.

- The Ministry of Agriculture has announced that farmers will be paid up to £300 per hectare a year to produce less food in a further 12 "environmentally sensitive" areas of Britain. Officials say the action is designed to keep small farmers in the countryside and prevent yuppies from buying their homes as weekend cottages.

- In Denmark the rich farmers will gain most from "reforms," according to a local government research report. According to Niels Groes: "All they will have to do in future is to pretend they are cultivating the land, drive the old Ferguson tractor over the fields when they have the time and the sun is shining, and then drive past the bank to draw their subsidy."