

**F**ARMLAND, more than 80 per cent of Britain's total area and our only permanent resource is owned by a fraction of the population. It is, in practice, in the hands of a closed shop whose market is protected more than any other productive sector of the economy.

Another bumper harvest has persuaded the Treasury to draw up new forecasts about the amount of money that will be needed next year to store British food "surpluses".

It estimates that £740 million from EEC funds will be spent to keep up prices for food producers.

Fewer and fewer farm owners are producing more and more food. Furthermore, agriculture is not bedevilled by industry relations problems. So for the Government – especially one with so many landowners in its midst – it is a classic success story.

So long as shelves are full in urban supermarkets, the Government can comfortably ignore the wider implications for the countryside – fields being ploughed up – for rural communities – depopulation and second homes – and of the immense concentration of landed wealth.

Britain, virtually alone in Europe, operates a free market in farmland. In theory, anyone can buy it; in practice, you have to be rich, whether you are British or a foreigner. The high cost of farmland, about £1,200 an acre on average in England and Wales and the highly capitalised system agriculture has now become, has shattered the traditional farming ladder.

*The other way in is simply by birthright.*

**B** RITAIN is also one of the few countries without an open register of land.

The information is carefully guarded by the Country Landowners' Association and estate agents. The Royal Commission on the Distribution of Income and Wealth – which, in its last report said that "the paucity of comprehensive, up-to-date information on land ownership is remarkable" – has been abolished by the Thatcher administration.

We do know, however, that:

● Fewer than 500,000 people work on the land, a lower proportion than in any other European country. And the number is falling.

## So who does own the land?



**Richard Norton-Taylor offers some answers**

● More than 1,000 farms disappear each year, bought up in the main by established farmers nearby.

● There are a little over 200,000 full-time farmers and agricultural partnerships and the number of full-time farmworkers is even smaller.

● Over Britain as a whole, about two-thirds of the estates of more than 10,000 acres (the most productive as well as the large parks) are still owned by individuals and private trusts.

The figures offer some perspective to the official statistics which record that most farms are small family holdings. There remains an immense, unique concentration of landownership in Britain.

*The Royal Commission itself estimated in 1979 that the top 1 per cent of the population owned 52 per cent of all land.*

Moreover, the bulk of the property is frequently distributed among the family before the death of the owner, or diverted into a trust, to avoid capital taxation. Three-quarters of the total personal wealth of the richest 1 per cent still consists of inherited wealth.

In the context of agriculture, the concentration of land ownership takes on an added significance: ten

per cent of all farms produce half of all the food grown in Britain.

**L** ANDOWNERS say that they resent interference from Whitehall, over planning restrictions, for instance. Yet they rely heavily on subsidies and grants, from the EEC, as well as Whitehall which gives them £374 million a year, according to latest figures.

They also argue that they are merely managing the land "in trust" for future generations; their responsibilities, they suggest, go far beyond just producing as much food and making as much short-term profit as they can.

Yet the Wildlife and Countryside Act says that, in future, landowners will receive financial compensation if they agree not to develop, drain or plough up valuable habitats and instead, preserve them for the community as a whole. (There are some signs that the Ministry of Agriculture, under pressure from the environment lobbies, will not allow farmers to do what they want with their land, though the resources the Government devotes to conservation are small compared to that earmarked for agricultural development.)

Though the Government holds up agriculture as a model of efficiency and productivity, farmworkers – still near the bottom of the wages league – have not reaped their share of the rewards.

**Indeed, farm owners may be efficient in terms of output per man and per acre but rising costs have strapped them to a treadmill, forcing them to increase production simply to maintain their profit margins.**

So not only are they producing food which has no real market (and is dumped on to the Third World or piles up in EEC-approved cold stores), they are now having to fight a battle with large food corporations whose resources are no match for the individual farmer.

These corporations are threatening to control exactly what is produced and how, taking over the land as well as retail outlets, the agricultural chemical industry and even the production of seeds.

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