

# Farmers and Deflation after Britain's 1821 Gold Resumption

**War-time debts vs. post-war prices:** During the Napoleonic wars, grain prices soared; by 1813 wheat averaged ~13.5 s./bushel ( $\approx 108$  s. per quarter) <sup>1</sup>. By 1822 the same wheat was only ~5.6 s./bushel ( $\approx 45$  s./quarter) <sup>2</sup> – roughly a 60% drop. Thus a farmer who borrowed at 100 s/qtr grain prices in 1813 and repaid in 1822 faced more than double the **real** debt burden with little extra income.

- *Data check:* Indeed Clark's reconstructed price series confirm ~108 s/qtr in 1813 vs. ~45 s in 1822 <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup>, so the "100→45 s." figure is essentially correct.
- *Typical borrowing:* Exact loan amounts are rarely recorded, but mortgages were common. Farmers often paid ~5–6% interest, so a £500 wartime loan would incur ~£25–30/year – a crushing cost when produce prices collapsed.

**Parliamentary testimony and reports:** Official records abound with farmers' complaints. In Feb 1822, MP John Gooch (Suffolk) told Parliament that dozens of petitions from his county showed "one unusual scene of distress" among farmers <sup>3</sup>. Economist David Ricardo (in Paris, Dec 1821) wrote that "the farmers – theirs is a pitiable situation" and saw no relief except "the liberality of their landlords" (who were "themselves in a state of suffering") <sup>4</sup>. Sir William Ellice (MP, Feb 1822) similarly warned that "*landlord and tenant*" would have fared well **if they had no debts**, but in reality both owed "debts or engagements... contracted on the faith of the artificial value" of high wartime prices <sup>5</sup>. By May 1822, MP Matthias Attwood summarized Committee evidence: if nothing changed, "a great portion of the land at present under cultivation... must of necessity... be abandoned, and its cultivation be given up... [with] the destruction of the farmers and labourers" <sup>6</sup>.

- *Relief measures criticized:* MPs repeatedly argued Parliament's relief efforts (malt tax cuts, minor subsidies) were too little. Attwood insisted only a *comprehensive* change (e.g. restoring the old money standard with debt adjustments) could prevent mass ruin <sup>6</sup> <sup>5</sup>.
- *Evidence basis:* These speeches refer to depositions given to three Select Committees on Agricultural Distress (1820–22). The written evidence (published in 1821) showed ubiquitous farmer hardship: evicted tenants, unpaid rents, and petitions from almost every agricultural county.

**Contemporary accounts:** Newspapers and writers of the time document individual hardships. For example, William Cobbett – touring southern England in late 1822 – reported devastating losses: at an October sheep fair a farmer who bought 100 lambs for ~24 s each saw them bring only ~8–28 s each two years later, a loss of ~£120 plus interest <sup>7</sup>. He also quoted markets where wheat fell as low as 24 s/qtr (new grain), averaging ~56 s <sup>8</sup>. Many laborers and tenant-farmers turned to poor relief as rents remained high while rents and taxes exceeded farm income <sup>7</sup>.

**Documented insolvencies:** While no single "hero" farmer story emerges, official records show many borrowers went under. The *London Gazette* (Aug 1822) lists numerous insolvent debtors including farmers. For instance, *John Griffin*, "formerly of Ogbourn St. George, **farmer**" (Wiltshire), appears among debtors <sup>9</sup>. So does *John Wiltshire*, of Warboys/Ramsey (Hunts), described as "farmer and labourer" <sup>10</sup>. These entries

imply that smallholding and tenant farmers became bankrupt (often switching to pubkeeping or other trades in records). (We found no detailed court testimony of a particular farmer's loan, but these lists confirm that many who "did nothing wrong" – i.e. simply farmed – lost everything under postwar deflation.)

**Tenant vs. landowner:** Sources emphasize debt burdens more than tenancy, but both groups suffered. Small tenant-farmers typically held land on high "rack rents" with heavy mortgages. When grain collapsed, tenants lost their farms. Landlords lost rental income (and often extended loans to tenants). Ricardo's remark (above) shows even landed owners were in "a state of suffering" <sup>4</sup>. In debates, MPs noted that farmers (tenant or owner) had financed prosperity on inflated prices and now had no margin. (One 1820 speech quipped that tenant-farmers got no benefit from higher corn prices when leases ended <sup>11</sup> – showing even before 1821, farmers felt squeezed.) In short, **both** tenants and owners were hurt, but evidence suggests many **tenants** ended up evicted or insolvent, whereas wealthier landowners could sometimes ride out the slump.

**Regional impact:** Distress was widespread. Petitions and press from multiple counties attest to it. Aside from Suffolk's Gooch <sup>3</sup>, we see reports from southern England: Cobbett's travels (1822) covered Hampshire, Wiltshire, Berkshire, etc., where he found labor wages falling and markets crashing <sup>8</sup>. The many Swing Riots (1830–31) in Hampshire, Sussex and Kent were direct fallout of this 1820s agricultural collapse. (By contrast, some northerners fared slightly better with industrial jobs available, though even places like Cheshire saw farmers pleading for relief <sup>12</sup>.) Overall, **no region was spared**, but southern and midlands counties figure prominently in the evidence of ruin.

**Summary:** In sum, the Resumption of Cash Payments (gold standard) in 1821 triggered a sharp fall in grain prices – e.g. ~108s/qtr in 1813 to ~45s in 1822 <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup> – while land taxes and debts remained. Historians and contemporaries alike note that indebted farmers' obligations effectively *doubled* in real terms. Primary sources (parliamentary debates, Gazette insolvent debtor lists, farmers' letters and newspapers) document farmers across England ruined by no fault of their own. As one MP warned, without adjustment the result would be widespread farm foreclosures and land left uncultivated <sup>6</sup> <sup>5</sup> – a calamity the evidence shows indeed unfolded in the 1820s.

**Sources:** Official Hansard debates and reports (1821–22) detail petitions and committee findings <sup>3</sup> <sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup>. Price data from Gregory Clark's agricultural history <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup> confirm the collapse. Contemporary letters/newspapers (e.g. Cobbett's *Rural Rides*) describe low market prices <sup>8</sup>. Insolvency notices in *The London Gazette* name specific farmers like John Griffin as bankrupt <sup>9</sup>. These primary sources together illustrate the devastation wrought by deflation on innocent debtors.

---

<sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup> Microsoft Word - Price Series - 2003.doc  
<https://www.econ.ucdavis.edu/faculty/gclark/papers/Agprice.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <sup>5</sup> <sup>12</sup> MOTION FOR A COMMITTEE ON THE AGRICULTURAL DISTRESS. (Hansard, 18 February 1822)  
<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1822/feb/18/motion-for-a-committee-on-the>

<sup>4</sup> Online Library of Liberty: The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo, Vol. 10 Biographical Miscellany - Portable Library of Liberty  
[https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/265/Ricardo\\_0687-10\\_EBk\\_v6.0.pdf](https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/265/Ricardo_0687-10_EBk_v6.0.pdf)

6 AGRICULTURAL DISTRESS REPORT. (Hansard, 7 May 1822)

<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1822/may/07/agricultural-distress-report>

7 8 The Project Gutenberg eBook of Rural Rides, by William Cobbett.

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/34238/34238-h/34238-h.htm>

9 10 thegazette.co.uk

<https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/17837/page/1228/data.pdf>

11 AGRICULTURAL DISTRESS. (Hansard, 30 May 1820)

<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1820/may/30/agricultural-distress>