Food for War
Agriculture and Rearmament in Britain before the Second World War

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Food for War
Preface

The story of the interrelationships among food, agriculture, and rearmament in 1930s Britain is indeed enlightening. Though dominated by military considerations, it is a broader story that exhibits political, economic, and social overtones as well. It further highlights the roles of highly dedicated civil servants, often narrow-minded lobbyists, and local newspaper editors, who put aside or modified their partisan positions in the interests of the nation. Together they informed and helped shape the government’s food policy, which in contrast to a number of other areas was quickly implemented and largely succeeded during World War II that followed. It is, in short, a story worth telling.

Writing this book was exhilarating, but it would not have been possible without invaluable assistance from numerous institutions, archives, and individuals. Iowa State University granted me a faculty leave which gave me time to organize my thoughts and to do research at the Public Record Office, the Scottish Record Office, and the National Library of Scotland while the University of Glasgow provided me with an academic home-away-from-home. Additional research trips allowed me to take advantage of the wonderful archivists and helpful staffs at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, the British Library, the British Library Newspaper Library, the Institute of Agricultural History, and the US National Archives. I have also done research and been granted permission to quote from the Astor Papers at the Reading University Library Archives; the Harvie-Watt Papers at the Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge; and the Woolton Papers at the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Although not an archive, the Headquarters of the National Federation of Women’s Institutes in London allowed me to examine its Executive Committee Minutes.

Among the many individuals who discussed and corresponded with me about my research, and saved me from numerous errors, are Simon Ball, Anne Crowther, Mike French, Milt Gustafson, Linda Hoare, Colin Kidd, Richard Kottman, John Martin, Tim Nenninger, Neil Rollings, Hew Strachan, and David Syrett. Jonathan Brown of the Institute of Agricultural History in Reading deserves special mention for
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The Government seem to ignore completely one of the most important elements in the defence of the realm, and that is the provision of food.

David Lloyd George

On 10 March 1936, in the wake of Germany’s Rhineland remilitarization, military matters were obviously uppermost in the minds of Britain’s members of parliament. Among the many speeches that day and evening was one by the famous World War I prime minister, David Lloyd George. To be sure, Lloyd George’s political reputation had become badly tarnished in the decade and a half after the war and his Liberal Party had suffered precipitous decline, but he still remained a major force in British politics. This factor along with his marvellous oratorical ability meant that when he rose to speak on that March evening, members inside the House of Commons and citizens outside paid attention to what he had to say. His remarks included the following:

I regret very much—and I am glad to see the Minister of Agriculture here—that the Government seem to ignore completely one of the most important elements in the defence of the realm, and that is the provision of food. We came nearer to defeat [in World War I] owing to food shortage than we did from anything else. I cannot understand why, when they are thinking of the whole problem of war, and possible dangers, that the greatest danger of all seems to be left out of account.¹

Lloyd George’s ‘greatest danger’ comment was nothing new. It had been brought up in the Commons as early as May 1934 and had never been completely absent from the discussion as parliament—and the nation—began again to face up to the prospect of war.² Lloyd George’s

² 289 HC Deb., 1933–4, col. 484, 3 May 1934.
linking of food to rearmament did not end, of course, with his March 1936 speech. It continued to be a topic of concern in parliament, and Lloyd George himself, who had considerable interest in food and agricultural matters, referred to it on other occasions before the Commons as did many of his fellow members. Interest in the relationship between food and preparations for war was not limited to parliament or the government. It percolated throughout the nation, and people in cities as well as in the countryside recognized its overriding importance. If war should break out, they said, our food supply must be protected. Guaranteeing the food supply may be elementary, but in their view it was of utmost significance. Lloyd George and the public may have disagreed on other matters, but on the necessity of having adequate food in wartime there was virtually unanimous agreement: it was vital to the well-being of the nation.

Despite its widespread, agreed-upon importance at the time, historians have virtually ignored food and agriculture, let alone their relationship to rearmament during the 1930s. The reasons for the relative neglect are not difficult to figure out. By this time Great Britain was not, as we are all aware, an agricultural country. By 1938 less than 4 per cent of the people made their living directly from the land, agriculture represented only 3.2 per cent of the national income, and industrial Britain imported two-thirds of its foodstuffs from abroad.

Given these figures historians who have delved into the decade have not emphasized food and agriculture, but have concentrated on other issues, such as appeasement, foreign and colonial policies, political developments, military rearmament, industrial considerations, economic thinking, and the like. Once these writers had set forth what they conceived of as the ‘vital’ concerns of the period, they then examined them from almost every conceivable angle.

In the 1950s and 1960s these issues led historians to characterize the 1930s as the devil’s, dismal, or depression decade, and each of these adjectives obviously lends itself to a variety of fascinating interpretations.
But in the 1970s and 1980s the focus expanded. While not neglecting the issues raised earlier, historians began to look at them in new ways. The work of John Stevenson and Chris Cook, among others, was especially fruitful in this regard. Rather than seeing the decade as dismal, they characterized it as deceptive. True, their new tack did not mean that historians glossed over the harsh realities of the 1930s, but, amidst the problems, they saw an increased standard of living, a better way of life for many British citizens.

Because of this longer perspective, historians further began to reach a consensus about the decade. In their view, there emerged two major trends: overcoming the Depression and instituting rearmament. These were the touchstones. Poverty, unemployment, and international strife were still part of the landscape, but they were now seen within the framework of redressing the Depression and attempting, however haltingly, to rearm the nation.

No matter how admirable this new thinking has been, food and agriculture and especially their relation to rearmament have still not been integrated sufficiently into our appreciation of the 1930s. This book will attempt to overcome the oversight, for food and agriculture need to be recognized as significant factors in Britain during the period, not as elements standing apart from the previously identified major issues. They also deserve to be part of the historical discourse.

Moreover, the relationship between food, agriculture, and rearmament should be analysed as important in its own right because it provides additional insights into the decade. For one thing, food and agriculture became linked to rearmament in the broad sense as early as 1935–6. In addition, contrary to a number of other areas in the 1930s, Great Britain’s preparations for war in food matters were well advanced at its outbreak, and, furthermore, rural and farm interests well understood the implications of what a war would mean to them. To deal adequately with these three themes—linkage, preparations, and understanding—requires a vertical rather than a horizontal approach. Not only do we need to look at the government’s formation and carrying out of food and agricultural policies, but we also need to discuss the elements that influenced those policies. These influences

348; and Noreen Branson and Margot Heinemann, *Britain in the Nineteen Thirties* (New York, 1971), 323.

include other aspects of the economy, such as Treasury policy, unemployment, and military rearmament; the parliamentary debates of the period; the lobby groups involved; and the opinions of the rural people themselves. The end goal will be to add to our understanding of the relationship between food production, processing, distribution, and consumption on the one hand, and rearmament as broadly conceived on the other.

It may seem odd that such everyday words as food, agriculture, and rearmament require definition, but they have special connotations in this study. As used here, food will pertain primarily to purchases overseas and domestic farm goods made into finished products, distributed and consumed inside Britain, while agriculture, as defined by the government for defence purposes, will relate primarily to home production. Rearmament will not be limited to military armaments, equipment, and personnel, but will include industry, agriculture, and the home front as well.

To give credence to the above themes it is necessary to discuss representative works and the extent to which they deal with food and agricultural concerns during the 1930s. General histories of twentieth-century Britain have usually given them short shrift. Peter Clarke’s *Hope and Glory: Britain, 1900–1990* and T. O. Lloyd’s *Empire, Welfare State, Europe: English History, 1906–1992*, for example, have almost nothing to say about food and agriculture, though they do mention food rationing during World War II, which had been planned in the 1930s.7 Keith Laybourn’s *Britain on the Breadlines: A Social and Political History of Britain between the Wars* confines his remarks on food to cursory comments on nutrition as related to poverty.8

Histories that have concentrated on the 1930s do somewhat better than the general works. Both John Stevenson and Chris Cook in their previously mentioned *Britain in the Depression* and Andrew Thorpe in *Britain in the 1930s* examine food policies, although Thorpe is more inclusive in that he devotes a number of pages to agricultural policy and to landed society as well.9 Noreen Branson’s and Margot Heinemann’s

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social history, *Britain in the Nineteen Thirties*, has little on the rural population, but they do devote a chapter to food consumption and nutrition.10

Among the general social and economic histories John Stevenson has a considerable discussion of both food and agricultural policies in the 1930s in his *British Society, 1914–1945*, and R. J. Oddy has a chapter on ‘Food, Drink and Nutrition’ in the second volume of F. M. L. Thompson’s *Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750–1950*.11 Peter Dewey’s *War and Progress: Britain, 1914–1945* describes briefly rationing during World War II as well as agriculture and the rural areas in the 1920s, but he makes no reference to the intervening decade.12 Dewey’s omission is particularly surprising, since he is an outstanding agricultural historian. George Peden’s *British Social and Economic Policy* briefly examines agricultural policy in the 1930s and rationing and subsidies during the war.13 He has also written the highly acclaimed *British Rearmament and the Treasury, 1932–1939*, which examines the Treasury’s restraining influence on Britain’s ability to rearm, a theme on which he has elaborated in a number of articles and in portions of his more broadly based *The Treasury and British Public Policy, 1906–1959*.

The most extensive discussion of food and agriculture is in Sidney Pollard’s *The Development of the British Economy, 1914–1980*.14 Although the book is not based on original sources, Pollard surveys agriculture and nutrition in the 1920s and 1930s and food production and subsidies during the war. On the opposite end is Derek Aldcroft’s *The Inter-War Economy: Britain, 1919–1939*. He writes in his preface: ‘There is virtually nothing [in the book] about agriculture. The subject did not fit very well into the theme of the book and I must admit that I shrank from the task of covering a field about which I know very little and which I find incredibly boring.’15 To Aldcroft’s credit, he did partially redeem

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himself in volume one of *The British Economy* series, when he perceptively states in relation to the 1930s: ‘The needs and interests of agriculture received “special treatment” from the National government largely because of “social and strategic” considerations.’

The lack of depth on food and agriculture in the general accounts does not mean that historians have neglected them altogether; for a number of writers have done excellent work which deals entirely or partially with these topics in the 1930s. Heading the list are two official histories, Keith Murray’s *Agriculture*, and Richard J. Hammond’s *Food*.16 While both studies (Hammond’s is three volumes) emphasize World War II, both have insightful portions on preparations prior to the conflict. Murray is especially helpful in his succinct yet thorough description of measures, such as the formation of marketing boards and subsidies, which the government instituted to help the badly depressed agricultural sector. He also stresses the plans worked out for agriculture prior to the war, although he still thinks the government could have done more in the areas of food reserves, labour problems, acreage and equipment increases, and price controls. Hammond, who condensed his findings into a shorter volume, *Food and Agriculture in Britain, 1939–1945*, is also critical of the government. He thinks that administrative procedures for food were excellent, but feels that policy, as distinct from administration, was insufficiently thought through for the tasks ahead. He is convinced, however, as is Murray, that those ‘charged with making prewar plans for food and agriculture were, on the whole, clearer in themselves, and more nearly realized in adequate administrative arrangements, than perhaps any other part of the United Kingdom’s war-economic preparations.’17

Standing alongside Murray and Hammond in importance is the work of Edith Whetham. Whetham contributed greatly to the official histories and is, in fact, probably the most knowledgeable British agricultural historian of the period. Three of her books are particularly pertinent: *British Farming, 1939–1945*, *Agricultural Economists in Britain, 1900–1940*; and the comprehensive *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, volume eight: *1914–1939*.18 Not only does Whetham cover the relevant

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political and business issues, but she is especially perceptive in her treatment of scientific agriculture and agricultural economics. She agrees with Murray, however, and undoubtedly influenced him, that in spite of World War II successes, more could have been done to get agriculture ready before the conflict. But she still believes that the situation in September 1939 was far superior to that before World War I. As she writes, ‘The end of the twenty years and ten months of uneasy peace found in excellent starting order that administrative machinery which was so completely absent in August 1914’.  

Among other books that examine food and agriculture in the 1930s at least in part, Richard Perren in his *Agriculture in Depression, 1870–1940*, admits that agriculture at the time did to an extent benefit from the beginnings of governmental assistance, but he insists that overall the depressed economy, especially internationally, continued to plague the British farmer. Jonathan Brown’s *Agriculture in England: A Survey of Farming, 1870–1947* is a perceptive synthesis, and he also has an excellent chapter on the National Farmers’ Union, the country’s most influential agricultural lobby, in J. R. Wordie’s *Agriculture and Politics in England, 1815–1939*. David Grigg’s *English Agriculture: A Historical Perspective* and Ralph Whitlock’s *A Short History of Farming in Britain* briefly analyse the state of England’s agricultural economy in the 1930s, though from differing perspectives. Also, both writers, as with most of the studies, do not discuss Scotland and Northern Ireland. The Scottish deficiency is made up in part in James Symon’s *Scottish Farming: Past and Present*. Peter Self and Herbert Storing, *The State and the Farmer*; W. Hurd Pedley, *Labour on the Land: A Study of Developments between the Two World Wars*; and Alan Armstrong, *Farmworkers in England and Wales, 1770–1980*, discuss the roles of landowners, farmers, and farm labourers, though Armstrong concentrates on the 1920s rather than the 1930s.

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A select but diverse list of additional books that treat specific aspects of food and agriculture are as follows: Victor Bonham-Carter in *The Survival of the English Countryside* stresses integrating rural and urban living; Howard Newby in *Country Life: A Social History of Rural England* argues that changes in agriculture were basic to changes in rural society; and John Burnett in *Plenty and Want: A Social History of Diet from 1815 to the Present Day* [1979] assesses nutritional developments from a long-term perspective.25 More international is Michael Tracy, *Government and Agriculture in Western Europe, 1880–1988*, which is valuable on British trade agreements, and Mancur Olson, Jr., *The Economics of Wartime Shortage: A History of British Food Supplies in the Napoleonic Wars and in World Wars I and II*, which examines comparatively how Britain coped with a loss of imports.26 Two informative institutional studies are Nicholas Goddard, *Harvests of Change: History of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*; and Sir John Winnifrith, *The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food.*27 Winnifrith was permanent secretary to the ministry in the early 1960s.

Two additional works that devote approximately a chapter each to the relationship between food and agriculture and rearmament are H. T. Williams (ed.), *Principles for British Agricultural Policy*, and Martin J. Smith, *The Politics of Agricultural Support in Britain.*28 Williams terms the preparations ‘food defence’, while Smith focuses on how the fear of war helped shape agricultural policy.

There are, finally, three relatively recent studies on twentieth-century British agriculture, which, although not directly pertinent to the subject, do shed light on it, and do indicate continuing interest in food and agricultural topics. Peter Dewey in his *British Agriculture in the First World War* shows that increases in food production were not actually as presumed earlier because of the government’s policy during the

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war’s last two years. Rather, Dewey contends, production remained remarkably steady throughout the conflict and shortages were never as bad as feared, though the nature of the diet did change. Dewey’s has now become the accepted view.

Andrew Cooper in his *British Agricultural Policy, 1912–1936: A Study in Conservative Politics* examines the Conservative Party’s role in reshaping agricultural policy in the inter-war period.  Cooper concludes that in the 1930s the Conservatives truly did want to strengthen agriculture which led them to introduce measures to relieve the farmer’s plight, but only insofar as they did not weaken industry. Moreover, according to Cooper, early in the decade, the National Government turned to the National Farmers’ Union to help formulate policy, a trend which resulted in ever closer cooperation between the government and the NFU in the late thirties and during the war itself.

John Martin’s dissertation, ‘The Impact of Government Intervention on Agricultural Productivity in England and Wales, 1939–1945’, is a revisionist work. Although at times he overstates his many points, he does demonstrate convincingly that Britain’s World War II increase in agricultural production was not so much a result of ‘technical efficiency’ as it was having more land under cultivation. He also contends that we have derived an overly rosy picture of the War Agricultural Executive Committees, the much-heralded county committees that oversaw farm production and practices in the countryside. With regard to the 1930s, Martin argues that the situation for many farmers was not as bleak as often portrayed and that conditions on the eve of the war ‘provided a suitable base for subsequent economic expansion of the agricultural sector’. The author has incorporated these insights into parts of his more extensive *The Development of Modern Agriculture: British Farming since 1931*.

Nevertheless, none of the above works examines food and agriculture, and especially their relationship to rearmament, comprehensively during the 1930s. To address these topics as completely as possible will obviously increase our understanding of the period, since

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rearmament was one of the ultimate issues of the period. Moreover, knowing how the government planned to handle food and agriculture if war should break out as well as the extent to which the public was informed about these plans, should broaden our appreciation of the many issues Britain faced during its ‘deceptive’ decade.
We [in the 1930s] were in a transition . . . proceeding by trial and error.

Sir John Boyd Orr

The story of the coming together of food and agriculture with rearma-
ment during the last half of the 1930s had obvious precedents. To un-
derstand them we need to go back into the century, in this case to the
First World War. Moreover, what happened in food and agriculture in
the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s also had a bearing on what
happened later. Food-related concerns, like every facet of British life
between World War I and the mid-1930s, went through a series of ups
and downs with painful adjustments, or failures to adjust, to a succes-
sion of new, seemingly unprecedented situations.

Despite the privations of World War I it was generally a good
period for landowners and farmers with much better prices and profits
raising at least the hint of a smile on the faces of usually dour British
farmers. The same good fortune prevailed in the food industry, though
customers did not necessarily share in the economic good times experi-
enced by traders and retailers because of shortages and higher prices.
Still, grumbling did not lead to widespread discontent—or to starva-
tion; the nation and its citizenry survived and thankfully emerged from
the war on the winning side. But in the 1920s, as the country readjusted
to normal pursuits, the situation for agriculture again went down hill,
and the governments, primarily Conservative, showed little inclination
to help out.

The Depression made things even worse. In this climate not only
was agriculture severely affected, but the entire economy suffered.
First Labour, and then the National Government undertook steps to
try and deal with the nation’s problems. Many historians have con-
tended that the governments should have done more, but by British
standards, going off the gold standard and instituting tariffs, among
other measures, were strong medicine indeed. As Sir John Boyd Orr, the famous nutritionist, wrote when discussing the food situation in the 1930s, ‘We were in a transition . . . proceeding by trial and error’.1 What Orr was describing for food applied to industry and commerce as well.

By mid-decade the worst of the Depression was over. There remained pockets of discontent, especially among the unemployed, and in certain regions, but, on the whole, conditions were improving. At this point the external threat raised its head. It had been there for some time, but now—in the form of Germany, Italy, and Japan—it was becoming very real, and the nation and the government, no matter how reluctantly, had to face up once again to the prospect of war.

How did all of this affect food and agriculture? It is helpful to quote again from Orr to remind us of the overriding significance of what was occurring. He wrote: ‘Whatever is done with food affects not only agriculture but almost every trade and financial interest and every household in the country.’2 In this context—the pervasiveness of food in our everyday lives—the issue of the food supply and the overarching theme of rearmament became linked.

With regard to 1935–6 this linkage brings up a number of questions. What was the government doing at this early stage to ensure adequate food in time of war? What about the problem of the food supply from overseas? What about domestic production? How was the domestic situation related to the hotly contested debate, in which Orr to an extent was involved, about agricultural decline? What about food processing, distribution, and consumption? To what extent were the processors, distributors, and retailers to be involved if war broke out? And finally, what about providing for the troops? How were their needs to be met? But before examining these questions, we need to delve into the precedents before food and agriculture became intertwined with rearmament in the last half of the deceptive decade.

From a food standpoint World War I divides into two phases. During the first phase, between 1914 and late 1916, the government for the most part saw no need to intervene in normal trade patterns.3 Food prices rose, but this was offset to a degree by rises in wages. Food

1 Sir John Boyd Orr, Feeding the People in War-Time (London, 1940), 23–4.
2 Ibid.
imports held up fairly well, though there was less shipping-space for food and animal feed, and in the case of wheat, the loss of Russian and to an extent Australian grain was fortunately made up by importing more from the United States, Canada, and Argentina.

Nevertheless, it is not surprising that the war still had an impact on food and agriculture even during this so-called early period of laissez-faire.⁴ There was a decrease in the number of farmers and farm workers, fewer horses and less fodder were available because of the demands of the army, and there were difficulties in procuring imports because of the international competition for food. Furthermore, the rise in consumer prices was more or less continuous and exacted its toll on the population.

As a result the Asquith government set up a number of committees to look into finding solutions for the nation’s food problems. Without exception the committees called for more land to be put under cultivation, minimum wages for farm labourers, and price guarantees for the two essential grains, wheat and oats. (In terms of price guarantees, they were to apply only to England and Wales, since the committees for Scotland and Ireland decided not to recommend them.) Nothing came of these recommendations immediately, but the government did undertake one tangible step when it established War Agricultural Executive Committees, called War Ags, for each county to monitor local conditions, although they were given no executive authority.

The lengthening and deepening of the war prompted the government in the late summer of 1916 to begin considering more substantial measures, including food rationing and even assuming control over the entire food sector. In November the discussion took concrete form when the President of the Board of Trade, Walter Runciman, recommended that the government regulate the supply, distribution, consumption, and price of food, and that it appoint a food controller to oversee the process.

In December a new government under Lloyd George assumed office. One of its first acts was to usher in the second, or interventionist, phase of Britain’s wartime food policy. Since it was based on past reports and discussions—some of which took place even before the war—it was not as radical a departure as one might expect. What was radical was the form that it took, and food controls became even more the order of the day when Germany reinstated unrestricted

⁴ Whetham, Agrarian History, viii. 89–95.
submarine warfare in February 1917. Though centralized control had already been imposed on other parts of the economy, it now became imposed on food as well.

The government’s first step was to set up the necessary administrative machinery and to bring in new personnel. Lord Devonport was appointed Food Controller and put in charge of the newly created Food ministry. R. E. Prothero, later Lord Ernle, was named to head the Board of Agriculture, and he instituted a Food Production Department under Sir Arthur Lee, later Lord Lee, and Sir Thomas Middleton to oversee the home food production campaign, which was launched before the 1917 planting season. An important aspect of the relationship between the Food and Agriculture departments was that their work was clearly delineated from the outset: Agriculture was to look after domestic food production and make sure it increased, and Food was to control everything else—from imports to consumption to prices and wages.

Almost simultaneously with the establishment of the new machinery, the Selborne Committee, which had been examining agricultural concerns, issued its report. It went even further than the previous committees, for it recommended that inefficient farmers be dispossessed of their land either temporarily, or in extreme cases, permanently. The Committee went on to suggest numerous other measures, including promotion of the sugar beet industry, more economic services for farmers, more agricultural research and education, and more support for rural organizations, such as the Women’s Institutes and Young Farmers’ Clubs. While none of these ‘other’ suggested measures was acted upon until years later, they indicate that interested parties, in this case the agricultural experts who made up the Selborne Committee, often take advantage of wartime necessities, or preparations for war, to push their own agendas, whether directly related to the war or not.

But the government did consider the recommendation for dispossessing ‘poor stewards’ to be relevant and turned over implementation to the county committees, who were now given executive authority. Although they probably at times overstepped their bounds, for the most part they seem to have exercised their power judiciously. The War Ags also helped the landowners and farmers procure loans, overcome

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6 Ibid., and Dewey, *British Agriculture*, 171.
labour shortages, and obtain seed and equipment (including tractors bought mainly from America). The result was that the War Ags and their Sub-Committees proved to be vital components in ensuring that more land was ploughed and more grain produced.

The Corn Production Act of August 1917 spelled out those aspects of the government’s policies that required legislation. To induce farmers to plough more land, the act stipulated a price guarantee for wheat and oats. It was to last for six years, but to be reviewed after four. Barley was excluded primarily for temperance reasons, though the fact that any land suitable for barley was also normally suitable for wheat or oats was an additional factor. The act further helped hard-pressed tenants by freezing the rents they had to pay landowners.

Another aspect of the bill—a minimum wage for workers of 25s. (£1.25) per week, to be adjusted as necessary by a central wages board—was to benefit both farmers and labourers. The measure was insufficient, however, to overcome the losses in farm workers to the armed forces, and the shortfall had to be made up by finding substitutes. Although the exact numbers cited by sources vary, at the end of the war, the substitutes included about 73,000 soldiers given leave to help with the harvest; 30,500 prisoners of war; 30,000 from nearby villages; and 11,500 from the Women’s Land Army, a highly successful government programme which took young volunteers from towns and cities and trained them to carry out a variety of farm chores. In addition, some families spent their holidays helping out, and a smattering of foreign aliens and conscientious objectors were also involved.

A final aspect of the food programme—rationing—was instituted because of increased hoarding and a general malaise that had set in among the populace after more than three years of war. The result was the rationing of sugar in January 1918, followed by meat, ham, bacon, butter, and tea later in the year. Potatoes and bread were not rationed, but both were subject to price controls. Bread was also subject to an increase in the extraction rate—milling more of the outer shell of the wheat—along with mixing in up to 5 per cent of other flour, such as potato, oat, or rye. The so-called ‘war bread’ was nutritious enough, but its grey colour did not make it a favourite at the dinner table.

7 Whetham, Agrarian History, viii. 94–7; Dewey, British Agriculture, 249; and Pamela Horn, Rural Life in England in the First World War (New York, 1984), 107.
How does one assess the belatedly implemented food programme? In one sense it can be deemed a success.\textsuperscript{9} Landowners and farmers received better prices, which exceeded the increased costs for labour, seed, and equipment. The domestic food production campaign increased the feeding of the population from the equivalent of 125 days per year in 1914 to 155 days at the end of the war. And rationing did for the most part even out the accessibility to difficult-to-buy goods and cut down on hoarding.

But in another sense the programme was less successful than it appeared on the surface.\textsuperscript{10} The price and wage guarantees were beside the point, because the market price for grain and the wage price for labour exceeded the guarantees. Moreover, while there was an increase in the amount of land under production, it was not overly impressive—from 10.23 million acres in 1916 to 12.36 million acres in 1918, or a rise of 20.6 per cent. At the same time calorie consumption remained steady—21.4 million calories in 1914 and 21.2 million in 1918, or 97 per cent of what it had been four years earlier. Furthermore, the increase in acreage related to grain production, which the calorie figures show were offset by losses in livestock production. Thus, the ploughing up campaign did not really increase production, but merely shifted it. Finally, rationing was a help, but it was not fully functioning nationwide until mid-1918, and therefore had little time to prove itself.

Yet, in a broader context, the government’s food policy did have a major impact.\textsuperscript{11} For one thing, landowners and farmers made money, and this condition set the stage for a dramatic shift in ownership after the war. Second, World War I definitely provided a precedent. Having set up a machinery for food in one war, it was looked at as a logical antecedent when war clouds again began to form in the 1930s. And third, the food policy succeeded in human terms. The citizenry—both rural and urban—appreciated that the government had shown an interest in them and had undertaken measures to try and cope with food shortages and to guarantee their well-being.

After the war two major things related to food and agriculture


\textsuperscript{10} Dewey, British Agriculture, 201–42, and Brown, Agriculture in England, 70.

\textsuperscript{11} Dewey, British Agriculture, 241–2.
happened. One was deregulation. This did not happen all at once, but gradually. Marketing controls on meat ended in December 1919. Those on milk and dairy products came to an end February 1920, and on grain products later in the year. After overseeing the process, the Ministry of Food went out of business. As for the Board of Agriculture, it was changed to a ministry which enhanced its position within the cabinet. Finally, despite high prices on farm goods—three times their pre-war levels—parliament responded to indications of food scarcities and the renewal provision in the 1917 Act to pass a new Agricultural bill in December 1920. In it, guaranteed prices for wheat and oats were to continue for four years as was a minimum wage—now 36s. 6d. (£1.83)—for farm workers. Even so, for all intents and purposes government involvement in the food business was drawing to a close.

The second thing that happened was a veritable revolution in land ownership. The bare figures—from 10.2 per cent of the land owned by those who farmed it in 1909 to 36.6 per cent in 1927—tell only part of the story. The ‘sell-off’ had begun before the war, when, as a result of the graduated income tax, landlords had started selling their land to ‘new’ farmers. Land sales had then stalled during the conflict, but picked up dramatically after it was over. The reasons varied. Landowner families had lost a number of their sons in the war and in the flu epidemic of 1918–19; labour costs were high, but so was the price for land; and death duties on estate taxes rose sharply. In this atmosphere many landowners decided to invest their money elsewhere, and many tenants, who had done relatively well during the war—in part because of the freeze on rents—were willing buyers.

The effect was twofold. A new group of farm owners came into existence, and they became an increasingly influential voice in the agricultural community. Just as importantly, however, the new owner-occupiers did not prosper. The high prices they were receiving for farm goods began to decline in the spring of 1921, and this, coupled with soaring costs, especially for labour, set the stage for widespread discontent in the countryside.

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The bursting of the good times bubble for farmers led the government to reconsider its position.\textsuperscript{14} In May 1921 the Minister of Agriculture, Sir Arthur Griffith-Boscawen, warned the cabinet that the spring decline in wheat and oats prices meant that the minimums set by the 1920 act would actually come into effect, and agricultural experts predicted that the cost could be as high as £30 million per year. In June this prompted Griffith-Boscawen to announce a repeal of the guaranteed price minimums, and the announcement took statutory form when parliament passed the Corn Production Acts (Repeal) Act on 21 August. The act became known as ‘the Great Betrayal’ of British agriculture.

There is some truth to this contention of ‘the Great Betrayal’, but it is not the whole truth. In the first place, farmers were not immediately left at the mercy of the market place. The act stipulated, as compensation, that wheat farmers were to receive £3 per acre and oat farmers £4 per acre. Even though this concession cost the government £19.7 million, the Treasury was not as critical as it might have been, since it was only for one year.

Moreover, the 1921 Act made a further concession to farmers: it did away with the central and country wage boards that had set wages for labourers.\textsuperscript{15} This allowed farmers to determine how much to pay their workers. Given the economic climate, this meant lower wages. The upshot of the wage cuts was labour disaffection, which took overt form in a number of strikes, the most serious of which broke out in Norfolk in 1923. The government—not surprising for a Labour government—sympathized with the strikers and reinstituted the wage boards. The move stabilized wages, improved conditions, and defused the discontent. Nevertheless, reinstating the boards did nothing to alleviate the basic wage disparity between agricultural and industrial workers. The ‘flight’ from rural to urban Britain continued.

A third mitigating factor was that most farmers, especially the increasingly influential National Farmers’ Union, were not that displeased with the 1921 Act.\textsuperscript{16} Farmers for the most part abhorred

\textsuperscript{14} Whetham, Agrarian History, viii. 140–1.
\textsuperscript{16} Cooper, British Agricultural Policy, 1912–1936: A Study in Conservative Politics (Manchester, 1989), 56.
governmental regulations, a situation, which, in some respects, continues to this day. As Andrew Cooper has emphasized, farmers did not mind doing away with the price guarantees so long as wages were also deregulated. What they wanted was for the government to assist them in creating the conditions for a more open market, not intervention.

The Conservative government of Stanley Baldwin was only too happy to oblige. It was willing to help out, but only minimally. One exception, already noted, was the return of the wage boards, which also regulated, among other things, hours, overtime pay rates and provisions for holidays. Another exception was in the sugar beet industry, which the government wished to promote for security and diversification reasons. The act, passed in 1925, provided a subsidy for growing sugar beets and was to last for ten years. It was a success. Twenty-two thousand acres were under cultivation in 1924, 390,000 in 1934.

Less successful was an Agricultural Credits Act in 1923, designed to promote cooperatives among farmers, but another credit act in 1928, which provided loans to farmers to purchase or improve their land, did help out. So did the Land Drainage Act of 1930, in which the government agreed to spend £1 million over five years to improve farmland, and the government also provided small grants to rural district councils to improve roads and for the building of cottages.

Still, these measures did little to improve the overall situation in the countryside. Farmers went back to their old ways—less grain and more livestock and dairy farming. This was particularly agreeable to the new farmers, who preferred animal husbandry to the cost of crop farming. Prices for farm goods did not improve, however, as a surplus in the world food supply had a negative impact on British producers. Furthermore, conditions for the farm workers remained on the whole deplorable with low wages, poor housing, and a lack of amenities. No wonder historian Maurice Kirby has written, by the end of the 1920s, ‘agriculture was once again a depressed industry’.

But before one is too critical of the government, it is important to remember its priorities. It viewed regulation of the market as

20 Noel Whiteside, Bad Times: Unemployment in British Social and Political History (London,
counter-productive. The government wanted to keep down inflation and to try and keep a stable and strong currency so that industry could regain its dominant global position. From a monetary standpoint, the objective was to restore and then maintain the gold standard at pre-war parity. To be sure, unemployment at over a million was too high, but according to manufacturers, that was the fault of the trade unions. For Britain to flourish again, it had to reassert its greatness as the champion of free trade, the world financial centre, and the maker of goods for people around the globe. Rural Britain might be beautiful, but the agricultural industry was no longer considered a vital component of the business equation.

In a sense agriculture was similar to defence during this time of peace. It, too, and the war that preceded it, were perhaps best forgotten, as Brian Bond has pointed out, like a bad dream. But again like agriculture, defence could not be totally ignored. World War I had been too traumatic, too devastating to be completely shoved aside. The Committee of Imperial Defence agreed and decided to establish a Sub-Committee on the Question of National Service in a Future War. This Sub-Committee was to examine, on a recurring basis, the links between the military and civilian parts of the defence machinery. The Sub-Committee spawned two others. One was a Sub-Committee on Manpower, set up in 1923 to deal with potential military and civilian personnel problems during wartime. The other was a Principal Supply Officers’ Committee, instituted in 1924 and chaired by the President of the Board of Trade, to consider war equipment and raw material needs in case of war. All three committees conceived of their briefs broadly, and this meant that from time to time they discussed food issues as related to war.

With regard to food specifically, the government retained a small nucleus of the Food ministry in the Board of Trade even after the former ceased operations in 1921. It was called the Civil Emergency Food

20 THE BACKGROUND

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22 NS, 1st Conclusions, Standing Interdepartmental Committee on National Services in a Future War, 8 Feb. 1923, Public Record Office (PRO), CAB 57/1; MO(36)2, Magnum Opus Papers, 7 July 1936, CAB 63/51, PRO; and Neil Rollings, ‘Whitehall and the Control of Prices and Profits in a Major War, 1919–39’, unpub. MS, 7–8.

Organisation, and it was ready to act if necessary during the General Strike of 1926. Its tasks at the time were to make sure that food prices remained stable and that the normal flow of goods was not disrupted. This was to be achieved by maintaining close liaison with major wholesalers and retailers across the country. As it turned out, the organisation did not have to intervene because the strike was short enough not to upset the nation’s trade patterns. But many of these individuals—both governmental and civilian—had also worked in or had relations with the Food ministry during the war. What this meant was that Civil Emergency Food Organisation personnel had the experience and were further developing the expertise—they were also alerted when the government went off the gold standard in 1931—to deal with more than domestic crises. In fact, in November 1936 it re-emerged as one of the two crucial elements—the other was the Agriculture ministry—to get the farming community and the food industry prepared for the eventuality of war.

During the Great Depression, which was at its worst between 1929 and 1932, the difficult situation in the agricultural sector became even more desperate. Agriculture, of course, was not alone, for the rest of the British economy also suffered. The people considered unemployment, which rose from 1,503,000 in 1929 to 3,402,000 or 17 per cent of the workforce in 1932, to be the crucial factor. The new Labour government, which had returned to power in May 1929, was unable to cope with the economic collapse, however, in part because of its severity, in part because Labour’s two main factions could not agree among themselves. The result was a split in the party and a new election in August 1931. The much smaller faction, headed by Ramsay MacDonald, won a resounding victory because it agreed to govern with the Conservatives in the form of a National Government. But the main reason the National coalition won was not so much the split in Labour as it was the widespread defection of Liberal party voters to the Conservatives. Although MacDonald remained Prime Minister in the new government, as one might expect, it had a much more conservative flavour than its predecessor.

Once in power the National Government passed two key measures: the abandonment of the gold standard and the accompanying depreciation of silver in September 1931 and the instituting of a general tariff of 10 per cent (with some exceptions) five months later. These measures were the cornerstones of the National Government’s recovery programme.

What they signified was that the government would now regulate much more closely than before the nation’s currency and its overseas trade. But these acts were not as radical a departure from Britain’s past as they appear on the surface, for they were to be accomplished in typical British fashion, by orthodox means through a balanced budget. In the government’s view the way out of the Depression was not to undertake radical measures, such as deficit spending or extensive public works, but to respond in a prudent, fiscally responsible manner.

But what about the unemployed workers? They were, after all, the fundamental element in the Depression. The government and the manufacturers were well aware of this fact, but while they expected the enacted remedies eventually to lead Britain out of its doldrums, they still had the immediate plight of the workers on their hands. The means selected, however, caused further distress. Until September 1931 the unemployed could draw benefits for up to 74 weeks or even longer for those who continuously could not find work. But the large number of recipients and the amount—17s. (85p) per week for adult males, 9s. (45p) for dependent wives, and 2s. (10p) for each child—forced the government to borrow from the Treasury rather than being able to depend solely on its normal insurance fund. The National Government therefore was forced to adopt new standards, and they put into effect a Means Test for households. The benefit was reduced to a maximum rate of 15s. 3d. (76p) for men and 8s. (40p) for women. After 26 weeks local inspectors from Public Assistance Committees were to see if benefits should be continued. Every four weeks the inspector ‘visited’ the unemployed worker’s home, checked his possessions, and looked into the work status of those residing in the household. An employment exchange then assessed the ‘means’ of the household and determined if the unemployment benefit should be extended. This high-handed

26 George C. Peden, British Economic and Social Policy: Lloyd George to Margaret Thatcher (Doddington, 1985), 119.
intrusion into workers’ lives was one of the most hated aspects of being unemployed. (Although Means Test regulations became less onerous as time went on, in part because the central government took over control, it was still on the books and continued to plague workers until 1941.)

The responses of the unemployed varied from despair, as dramatized in George Orwell’s *Road to Wigan Pier*, to indignation, as characterized by the hunger marches. The marches had actually begun in the 1920s, and the last one in 1936 from Jarrow to London was the most spectacular. Nevertheless, while the public may have sympathized with the marchers, they never gained widespread support. In fact, it is amazing how tame the responses of the British workers were, especially when compared with those of fellow workers in the United States and on the Continent.

During the period of the Great Slump defence matters also took a dramatic turn, but the turn was only indirectly related to the Depression. The precipitating event was the Manchurian crisis in late 1931, which prompted the government to revoke the Ten Year Rule and to start thinking once again about the prospect of a major war. Still this concern was not linked to the Depression except in the sense that a financial recovery would obviously make for a stronger nation, which, in turn, would strengthen Britain’s hand when dealing with other powers.

Also during the slump, as Ronald Blythe has pointed out in his classic *Akenfield*, workers and farmers shared a common plight and ‘were plunged into common hardships’. Neither had much money, and farm foreclosures reached their peak in 1932, with 600 alone in England and Wales. Moreover, farm workers were not in demand, and they had to apply for relief through the poor laws, since they were not covered by unemployment insurance until 1936.

Both the Labour and the National Government realized that the agricultural industry needed help. The first step occurred at a conference between January and March 1930, called by the Minister of Agriculture, Noel Buxton. In attendance were representatives of the major interested parties—the National Farmers’ Union, the Central

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Landowners’ Association, the National Union of Agricultural Workers, and the agricultural section of the Transport and General Workers’ Union. Prime Minister MacDonald opened the conference by stressing that farmers deserved a fair return for what they produced, and this principle set the tone for the discussions that followed. There were no specific proposals when the meetings came to an end, but they had brought to the fore three salient points. First, the government understood that agricultural interests were important. Second, the meetings started the process of formalizing relations between the state and agricultural lobby groups, a process that continued throughout the decade and beyond. Third, the meetings further made clear that the government favoured direct, though temporary, support of the farming community.

These three points first bore fruit with the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1931. It had initially been proposed by Dr Christopher Addison, the Labour agricultural minister after June 1930. Addison’s bill called for the establishment of marketing boards for each agricultural commodity if two-thirds of the producers approved. The boards were to set prices for buying and selling the commodity. The proposal became law only because the Conservatives were willing to go along with it, but there was nothing in the act about regulating imports, a problem corrected in a subsequent bill two years later.

Addison also proposed a Land Utilization Act, which was to provide funding to set up demonstration farms, to buy small parcels of land that would then be offered to unemployed industrial workers, and to purchase land being neglected by landowners as determined by county agricultural committees. The bill never became law because the National Farmers’ Union saw it as another example of ‘farming from Whitehall’, but similar ideas were enacted later on.

Another measure designed to assist farmers was the Wheat Act of 1932. It was to guarantee wheat farmers a standard price of 45s. (£2.25) per quarter. If the market price fell below the guaranteed price the government would make up the difference, not from the Treasury,
but from a levy imposed on the nation’s flour millers. The bill also set a ceiling of 27 million hundredweight (1.37 metric tons) for which the farmer would be paid.

The Wheat bill was, in effect, a delicate balancing act. It took into account that wheat farming, which centred in East Anglia and northeastern England, was the backbone of the agricultural economy. But the resulting increase in price for wheat would not be so high as to raise inordinately the price of bread, the backbone of Britain’s food diet. As a consequence wheat farmers increased production and gained higher prices, paid for by the millers through the government.

The preference given to wheat farmers also necessitated readjustments for foreign wheat, upon which Britain depended for 88 per cent of its supply. Because of this dependence wheat had been one of the items exempted from duty in the 1932 Import Duties Act, but the government now decided to impose a special duty on imported wheat of 25. (10p) per quarter. This duty meant increased costs for foreign competitors, although the Commonwealth and Empire were exempted from the new duty.

The marketing and wheat bills were only the beginning in the move toward governmental intervention into the agricultural sector. Like the other measures enacted by the National Government they did not produce immediate results. They did not, for example, halt the drop in agricultural prices, which declined 36 per cent between 1929 and 1933. Nor did they stop the unacceptably high unemployment among farm labourers and bankruptcies among farmers. Still, the principle of governmental involvement, no matter how slow and incomplete, was gaining at least some momentum.

During this time individuals still made a difference. Two of them were ministers of agriculture in the early 1930s, Christopher Addison and Sir John Gilmour. They, and their successors, Walter Elliot and William S. Morrison, were key persons, in the foreground and background, when it came to shaping Britain’s food and agricultural policies and eventually linking them to rearmament.

Addison (1869–1951) had an interesting and exceedingly varied career. He was born on a farm at Hogsthorpe in Lincolnshire, became a medical doctor, and in 1901 was named Hunter Professor of Anatomy

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35 Newby, Country Life, 171.
at Cambridge. He also became interested in politics. In 1910 he was elected as a Liberal to parliament for Huxton, and he remained its MP for twelve years. During World War I he served in various ministerial posts, including Minister of Munitions in 1916–17. After the war he became Minister of Health and was best known for his promotion of state-assisted housing.

In 1922 he switched to Labour. Seven years later the Labour government selected him as parliamentary secretary for the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries. He succeeded to that position himself in June 1930 and worked energetically to deal with the myriad of problems agriculture faced during this most trying time. After Labour’s defeat in August 1931 he became the principal spokesperson in defining Labour’s position in agriculture. Though he advocated nationalization of the land, a generally unpopular idea, he wrote and spoke to audiences throughout Britain, and perhaps because of his Liberal background and many connections, he was respected by friends and foes alike.

During most of the 1930s he continued to serve in parliament, and he was created a baron in 1937 and a viscount in 1945. One of his main concerns was to promote the National Park system, and after World War II he served in several capacities in Attlee’s Labour government. He died at High Wycombe and was buried near there in December 1951. In his obituary in *The Times* he was described as ‘an able administrator, forceful in character, sincere in his ideals, and forthright in Parliamentary debate’. In the 31 December edition one of his opponents, Lord Bledisloe, a long-time leader of the Central Landowners’ Association, wrote that agriculture ‘had no more consistent, knowledgeable and devoted friend’ than Christopher Addison. Bledisloe then ended his tribute by saying: ‘He [Addison] was a son of a farmer; his heart was always in the land and his overriding sympathy was with those who managed it and tilled it. . . . He will be sadly missed throughout the British countryside.’

Sir John Gilmour (1876–1940) was less well known than Addison, but he was a true insider in the Conservative Party and especially influential in agricultural matters. Gilmour was born near Leven in Scotland, the eldest son of the first baronet of Montrose. Educated at Edinburgh and Cambridge, he served in both the Boer War and World War I. Like his descendants, his main interests were farming, hunting,
and public affairs. In 1910 he became MP for East Renfrewshire, and in 1918 for Glasgow Pollock and represented that constituency for the next twenty-two years.

One of his governmental posts was Secretary of State for Scotland, which he held between 1926 and 1929. In 1931, after the Labour hiatus, he became Minister of Agriculture as part of the National Government, and initiated and carried through policies to try and stabilize the situation in that sector. In September 1932, after a cabinet reshuffle, he became Home Secretary, where his most notable contribution was to keep in tow the rightist groups that were springing up across Britain. Although he resigned from the Home Office in June 1935, Gilmour continued to serve the Baldwin government as head of a committee to reorganize Scottish government. More importantly for our purposes, he was a member of various interdepartmental committees that were overseeing the preparatory steps in food and agriculture for the eventuality of war.

When World War II broke out he was once again asked to serve in a ministerial position, this time as Minister of Shipping. But in the spring of 1940 he became ill, died at the end of March, and was buried at the Upper Largo churchyard in Fife. Among the many tributes, he was depicted as ‘a Parliament figure of a fair type’ and ‘a country gentleman’. As reported in The Times on 3 April, Prime Minister Chamberlain spoke to the Commons of Gilmour’s death as a ‘sad personal loss’ and then added: ‘He [Gilmour] had a long career of usefulness in various high offices of State and only recently he accepted responsibility for a new and arduous task [as Minister of Shipping] solely out of regard to the public service’. He was a ‘brave, honourable and kindly gentleman’. Whether in or out of office, Gilmour, like Addison, played a crucial role in formulating food and agricultural policies in the years before World War II.

In late 1932 Britain began to climb out of the depression. Given the orthodox methods the government was using, it was an unbelievably slow, arduous task, but the evidence of improved conditions was incontrovertible. From a high of 3,402,000 unemployed in 1932 the number moved down slowly but surely to 2,437,000 in 1935, and dipped again to 2,106,000 in 1936. Admittedly, this still left more than two million out of work, and misery for the working class remained widespread, but recovery was on the way.

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38 Garside, British Unemployment, 5–9.
Although going off the gold standard and instituting tariffs were ancillary factors in bringing about the recovery they did help in that they allowed British authorities to introduce cheap money. Nevertheless, most historians now believe that the main factor was a boom in private housing construction, along with low interest rates and rising real incomes for those at work. The fact that this had happened during a time when the government imposed a balanced budget and strict control of the money supply was not lost on the Treasury either.

Most of the major legislation in 1934–5 was an attempt to tidy up the unemployment problem. An Unemployment Act in 1934 established a centralized, non-political board to administer the insurance fund and to determine the unemployment rates. After a rough start—some of the rulings actually reduced rather than increased the amount unemployed families received—it generally became accepted because it worked impartially and did away with some of the more flagrant abuses of the Means Test.

There was also a geographic disparity in the rate of recovery. So-called ‘inner Britain’ in the south and the Midlands was doing better, but ‘outer Britain’ in the north, Scotland, and Wales continued to suffer. Therefore, the government passed a Special Areas Act in 1935 to try and relieve the distress in the troubled areas. It was too little—£2 million—actually to do much good, but it undoubtedly made the legislators and officials feel better.

A further development was an increase in local services. As a result of governmental grants and other revenues, more was done at the local level—from housing to highway improvements to library services—than ever before. The expansion of local programmes and staffs also helped stimulate the economy.

An exception to the recovery-driven bills was the Government of India Act of 1935. It had taken up an excessive amount of time in parliament, mainly because a number of ‘Empire’ Conservatives, including Churchill, opposed it, but also partially because of the recalcitrance of Indian leaders. Although it gave more power to the Indians themselves, His Majesty’s Government retained control over foreign affairs.

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and defence, which fell short of what India’s Congress Party wanted. The Indian imbroglio did not prevent Baldwin, however, from recording a solid victory in the November 1935 elections. (He had replaced the ailing and increasingly unsupported MacDonald the previous June.) The victors had continued to campaign as the National coalition, but the new government was truly Conservative in make-up. As for Labour, it gained some seats, but not nearly enough to run more than a distant second.

Also in 1935, as a result of the Abyssinian crisis and war, defence became a serious campaign issue. It had been there, of course, all along, and the government had been well aware of the situation for some time. It had a defence mechanism in place in the form of the Committee of Imperial Defence and a Chiefs of Staff Committee, which also had under them a number of Sub-Committees (perhaps too many) to provide input from the civilian ministries. Several of the committees, as mentioned previously, on occasion discussed food and agriculture as they related to defence. A new one was a Defence Requirements Committee quietly set up in November 1933. The following March it recommended a programme to spend £82 million (cut by the cabinet to £71 million) over five years to correct the deficiencies that had come about while the services had been subject to the Ten Year Rule.

Another new committee, the Defence and Requirements Committee (the word ‘and’ was added to differentiate it from the 1933 committee), was formed in July 1935. It issued a series of reports that proposed increases in defence spending and coordination of the entire defence effort. Their recommendations led to the establishment of a Minister for the Coordination of Defence in March 1936. Sir Thomas Inskip was selected for the job, although Churchill had hoped that he might be named to the position. A third new committee, called the Weir Committee after its chairman, the Glasgow manufacturer, Lord Weir, had been set up earlier in 1933. It was to look into mobilizing the country’s industry in event of war, and it was actually only the latest of a number of committees on which the government depended for expert

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advice. This trend of tapping the nation’s business and professional leaders for service with and in the government would accelerate in the years ahead.

Obviously, all of these defence considerations signified that the international scene had once again become much more threatening than ten or even five years earlier. But there were constraints on what the government could or was willing to do. The public was in no mood for war; its main concern was economic recovery. The Treasury and government felt recovery was in train because of the fiscally prudent measures they had adopted. They intended to deal with rearmament in the same way. On the other hand, the government was not about to admit that a defence build-up could also serve as a quick palliative to overcome unemployment. The government’s reluctance to link unemployment with defence was in spite of the fact that the Germans were demonstrating that defence could be used as a means to stimulate the economy—and it was working!

In agriculture the situation between 1932 and 1936, like that in industry, was gradually improving, but like a number of older industries—textiles, coal, shipbuilding—it had never been robust in the 1920s. Yet the principles put in place in food and agriculture in 1931—2 were added to and expanded upon during the next three years. In addition, other ideas, long bandied about and associated with scientific agriculture, began to have an impact on the farming community.

The most immediate agricultural problem for the government in 1932 was to work out the details of the Import Duties Act. The bill had exempted certain items from the list, and a number of them were agriculture related—wheat, livestock, meat, and certain oil seeds and fruits.\(^{45}\) It will be recalled that Britain was highly dependent on outside sources of food. In fact, about 67 per cent of its food supply (based on calories) came from abroad, and this figure included 84 per cent of its sugar, 84 per cent of its oil and fats, 88 per cent of its wheat, 91per cent of its butter, 75 per cent of its cheese, and over half of its meat. Among the major products, only in milk and potatoes was Britain self-sufficient. Still the government was committed to bettering the lot of farmers—meaning higher prices for their products.

That was what made the Ottawa Conference of July–August 1932 so crucial. At these meetings the government made it clear that the Dominions and Empire were to be included in the preferential treatment being given British farmers. Their governments were to continue to enjoy the food exemptions allowed in the tariff bill, and new or increased duties were to be placed on imports from other countries, such as the United States, Argentina, and Denmark, for their wheat, butter and cheese, eggs, certain fruits, and other products. The British government also agreed to limit meat imports, although the anticipated increase in the share of meat from the Dominions was not to cut into the share of Britain’s livestock producers. To promote flexibility a British import advisory committee could at any time recommend changes in the rates.

The Ottawa accords altered British trade patterns. Annual food imports from the Dominions and Empire were 41 per cent higher in 1938 than they had been in 1927–9. On the other hand, those from foreign nations were 17 per cent lower during the same period. More specifically, non-Empire wheat imports into Britain fell by about 40 per cent between 1929 and 1938, and Denmark ceased to be the main supplier of butter, being replaced by New Zealand and Australia. Denmark did negotiate preferential treatment for its ham and bacon, however, which allowed the Danes to retain 62 per cent of the import market into Britain on those products.

But Ottawa did not really help the British farmer. It merely increased food imports from the Commonwealth and Empire at the expense of foreign countries, though it did stimulate home production in certain areas, such as wheat. Ian Drummond is particularly critical of the conference, contending that besides not assisting the nation’s farmers, it did not arrest the decline in exports to the Empire, and it complicated Britain’s trade dealings with other countries. Although Drummond’s criticisms are overly harsh—abandoning free trade was bound to cause complications—Britain’s negotiations with its overseas food suppliers proved difficult, especially when the prospect of war began to loom ever larger over the horizon.

In addition to overseas trade the government sponsored a number of bills explicitly to help the farmer at home. One was the Agricultural

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Marketing Act of 1933, which was passed to overcome the omission of not restricting foreign competition in the 1931 bill. The new act aimed to provide better prices and more stable conditions, and it paved the way for boards to regulate the marketing of milk, pigs, bacon, and potatoes (one for hops had already been set up in 1932). Similar measures were adopted for Scotland and Northern Ireland, though in the latter region the Ministry of Agriculture set the rates and administered the programme. The boards were made up of prominent producers and traders, governmental officials, representatives of the employer associations and trade unions, and even members of parliament. They caught the imagination of other agricultural groups, such as livestock producers and orchard growers, to such an extent that they considered organizing themselves in a similar manner. But boards were never formed in these areas, in part because other measures were being passed to assist them, in part because after 1934 the government favoured independent commissions instead of producer-dominated boards.

The results varied. For milk producers it helped considerably, especially in Wales, where dairying became all important. In the bacon industry, however, the rise in prices helped the curers, but the public rebelled and there was a dramatic decline in consumption.

A second bill to assist agriculture was the Cattle Act of 1934. It granted farmers a subsidy to overcome exceptionally low prices in 1933–4, but, when the situation did not improve, the subsidy became permanent in 1936. A third act extended the sugar beet subsidy, begun in 1925. Though limited in the sense that domestically grown sugar was never more than a small portion of the entire market, sugar beet cultivation was sixteen times greater in 1935 than it had been in 1924, thus indicating the impact of the subsidy and the importance of continuing it. In 1935, the entire industry was amalgamated into the British Sugar Corporation, and an independent Sugar Commission was established to determine the rate of subsidy.


A fourth bill, passed in 1934, was to assist those out of work directly.\footnote{Whetham, *Agrarian History*, viii. 301.} It set up a Land Settlement Association, which bought large farms, divided them into smallholdings, and then encouraged unemployed labourers to become tenants and to join into cooperatives to farm them. The experiment proved expensive and was never popular, though it ended up with smallholder cooperatives dotting the countryside from Scotland to Cornwall.

The government had sponsored research and extension activities in agriculture for at least a generation prior to the 1920s and 1930s, and work in these areas continued to expand in the inter-war period.\footnote{Ibid., 273–80; ead., *Agricultural Economists in Britain, 1900–1940* (Oxford, 1981); Victor Bonham-Carter, *The Survival of the English Countryside* (London, 1971), 60–70; and Sir Edward John Russell, *History of Agricultural Science in Great Britain, 1620–1954* (London, 1966), 268–72.} Promoting research and giving advice to farmers were twenty-one research centres. Most of them were located near universities, and they specialized in studying specific areas—Reading for dairying, Cambridge for animal nutrition and plant breeding, Rothamstead in Hertfordshire for plant nutrition and soil fertility, Oxford for agricultural economics, the Rowett Institute at Aberdeen for nutrition, and so forth. They were staffed by dedicated experts—Charles Orwin, Arthur Ashby, Sir John Boyd Orr, Sir John Russell—individuals who achieved prominence inside and outside the agricultural sector.

The government’s programmes extended to the local level. Young farmers, for instance, attended institutes at centres to learn up-to-date farming techniques, and county officials sponsored day-long workshops with lectures and demonstrations to acquaint farmers with new methods. All of these programmes, and there were more, were put under a fifteen-member Agricultural Research Council in 1931. Although the directors and staffs at the centres continued to complain that farmers did not take sufficient advantage of their services, scientific agriculture was becoming an increasingly important part of the rural landscape.

In 1932 Walter Elliot (1888–1958), the third of four outstanding agricultural ministers in the 1930s, took office.\footnote{The Times, 9–17 Jan. 1958; Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, v. 301; and Cooper, *British Agricultural Policy*, 160–8.} He remained in that position until October 1936. The son of a cattle auctioneer, Elliot was born in Lanarkshire. He attended Glasgow University, became a doctor, and served in World War I. He became a Conservative MP for Lanarkshire
between 1918 and 1923, and then almost continuously for Glasgow Kelvingrove from 1924 to 1958. In the 1920s and early 1930s he held a number of secretarial posts in the ministries, including the financial secretary position at the Treasury in 1931–2.

He succeeded another Scot, Sir John Gilmour, as Minister of Agriculture in June 1932. It was his first real administrative position, and the ambitious Elliot was determined to make the most of it. An owner of an 8,000-acre sheep farm in Roxburghshire, his main goal was to promote stability and to make farming profitable. To do this Elliot favoured a corporate relationship between government and farming. In his view agriculture consisted of producer groups, such as farm associations, big farms, and trade unions, which should come together and set the standards for each particular group. To Elliot this meant protection, but it also meant self-governing boards, and that was the reason he favoured marketing boards. Though sincere in his beliefs he eventually had to accept that corporate governance over its own affairs had its limitations and that it would never replace governmental oversight.

By late 1936 Elliot had become too outspoken an advocate for farm interests, and the Baldwin government replaced him with William Morrison. Nevertheless, Elliot, known as Colonel Elliot, continued in the cabinet as Secretary of State for Scotland in 1936–8 and as Minister of Health in 1938–40. In addition to carrying out his ministerial duties, he played a key role on the various interdepartmental committees that were preparing the food and agricultural sectors for war. He also knew a great deal about what was going on throughout the system and shared this knowledge (one is tempted to say, gossip) with a number of people outside the government.52

In May 1940 the new Churchill government removed him from the cabinet, but he eventually returned to the government as Director of Public Relations in the War Office. In 1942, however, he resigned because of ill health. After the war, he remained involved in governmental matters, especially in Scotland, but died suddenly in 1958 at Harwood estate and was buried near Hawick.

In his obituary he was praised as a gifted writer and a persuasive speaker, who demonstrated a wide range of interests, and who was a true friend of the agricultural community. Violet Markham remarked that ‘ideas bubbled out of him’ (perhaps too many), and she called him ‘an outstanding Scot of our generation’. His second wife, Katherine

Tennant, was a forceful individual in her own right, and the two of them made a significant impact on British affairs in the 1930s and beyond.

What then was the state of agriculture in general in 1935–6? Although governmental intervention was not at the level it would reach later on—and the government insisted at this point that intervention was only temporary—it had none the less begun. A new policy had emerged as a combination of tariffs, quotas, subsidies, and marketing boards, and the government hoped that this policy, though piecemeal, would bring results. To a limited extent, it did. Farm incomes were about 15 per cent higher in 1937 than in 1931, and production rose 7 per cent during the same period. Still, the situation for farmers had not improved all that much, and one might contend had actually declined. Some farmers were doing better, but the government ruled out any major growth in the industry because it wanted to increase exports, and the tried and true reciprocal means for doing so was through food imports. Moreover, while the number of farmers remained relatively steady, the number of farm workers continued to decrease from 714,000 in 1931 to 643,000 in 1936. Among the reasons were low wages, long and irregular hours, few opportunities for advancement, and poor housing. Electricity was almost unheard of in workers’ cottages, and inside plumbing was still a luxury.

Thus, the government’s measures had not for the most part succeeded. In October 1935 John Henderson, the secretary of the Scottish Chamber of Agriculture, the primary association of Scotland’s large landowners, wrote a letter to Prime Minister Baldwin about the status of agriculture. In the letter Henderson complained that what the government had done to improve trade with the Dominions ‘had been ineffective for the home producer’, and that the trade ‘treaties have also been made with the view of helping industrial production which have prejudiced the possibility of increasing British agricultural production’.

Henderson then added that none of the marketing schemes ‘have been entirely satisfactory’ either, and that ‘any benefit resulting from


these Schemes to sections of the producers have been mostly at the expense of other sectors. The operation of the Schemes has generally resulted in the strengthening of the position and profits of the middle man’.

What was needed, in Henderson’s opinion, was to make import duties ‘adequate’ for agricultural interests, to expand import and subsidy payments to all major farm products, especially dairy products, and to make marketing schemes voluntary rather than compulsory. Needless to say, Henderson’s proposals went much further than the government was willing to go.

Although a number of other issues that relate to agriculture and food during the 1920–35 period might be discussed, the one that is pertinent for us is the extent to which they were being linked to rearmament during this early period before the relationship took definite shape in April 1936.

The first time the relationship was addressed in the Commons was on 3 May 1934. During question time, A. C. N. Dixey asked the President of the Board of Trade ‘whether in view of the changed conditions in Europe [a crisis in Austria] and the uneasiness created thereby as to the food supply of this country, the Government are considering taking any special measures in this matter?’

The Board of Trade’s parliamentary secretary, Dr Leslie Burgin, answered evasively: ‘My honourable Friend’s apprehensions are, I think, groundless, but I shall be glad if he would let me know more particularly what he had in mind.’ Burgin’s evasive reply was normal when defence issues were brought up in parliament and his assertion that Dixey’s fears were groundless did not mean that the government had not considered the issue. It did not have a comprehensive plan, but it had discussed previously from time to time Britain’s food supply in wartime, and it was considering ways to deal with the problem.

It will be recalled that when the Food ministry disbanded in 1921 a nucleus of the ministry had remained at the Board of Trade. Named the Civil Emergency Food Organisation, it was to make sure that any civil disturbance did not disrupt basic services, including the supply and distribution of food. Also in 1921 the government had a draft bill

55 HC Deb., 1933–4, col. 484, 3 May 1934.
written to establish again a Ministry of Food and a Food Controller if that proved necessary. The task of the Food Controller was to regulate ‘the supply and consumption of food and the encouragement of food production’.

Later in the 1920s the impetus for discussions of food during wartime came from the Sub-Committees of the Committee of Imperial Defence. In May 1924 the Principal Supply Officers Committee, while looking into the question of supplies in general for the armed forces, singled out foodstuffs as one of the areas to be investigated. The report of the Foodstuffs Sub-Committee (a marvellous name!) in February 1925 set forth a fairly detailed list of wartime requirements for army and air force units at home and abroad. The report included the overseas sources and the amount needed of certain imported foods from strawberries and coffee to sugar and tinned meat.

Another Sub-Committee, the Manpower Sub-Committee, also on occasion delved into food matters. In January 1926 it began to concern itself with reserved occupations in time of war, and those associated with food and especially agriculture were naturally on the list. In this case the objective was not so much to figure out which jobs were to receive a high priority, but to get a handle on the total number of workers in each industry and in each speciality within the industry, such as shepherds, cattlemen, machine operators, and agricultural labourers. Two years later members of the Sub-Committee brought up another issue that had a food component—the desirability of controlling profits and prices during wartime. And in June 1929 Sir Maurice Hankey, the secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence and the key person in defence matters, informed the committee ‘that there was in existence a comprehensive scheme for the formation of a Food Ministry if such action became necessary’. Whether this plan was the same as the bill drafted but not passed in 1921 was not divulged.

Between 1930 and 1933 discussions inside the government of the food–war relationship increased, but it was still a long way from being considered a major issue. It was clear, however, based on World War I experiences, that any threat to the food supply or other vital materials ‘must be met by rigorous and comprehensive Government control’.

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57 PSO/1st Minutes, 2 May 1924, CAB 60/1, PRO; and PSO 41, ‘Interim Report on Requirements for Three Months’, 19 Feb. 1925, CAB 60/5, PRO.
58 NS 5, ‘Report’, Jan. 1926, CAB 57/2, PRO; and CID, 185th Meeting, 19 June 1929, CAB 2/4, PRO.
59 Hammond, Food and Agriculture, 3, and NS(PN)2, 29 Feb. 1932, CAB 57/14, PRO.
In February 1932, while again talking about keeping down prices and profits if war should break out, the Manpower Sub-Committee ‘agreed that control of food would be their starting point’. The Sub-Committee then requested an interim report on the food question. Though it did not appear until a year later, the report, entitled an ‘Interim Report on Food’, contained the genesis of a comprehensive policy for food control in Britain during wartime. Among the items brought up were controls on imports, domestic production, and ancillary industries, such as flour milling and sugar refining. Other items included the stockpiling of essential goods, regulations for distribution and food rationing. Thus the report envisioned, but did not spell out in detail, governmental oversight on every step, from the time the product was grown or produced until it ended up in the hands of the consumer. Based on earlier precedents the report also accepted the division of functions between the Agriculture ministry for ‘stimulating’ home production, and a newly created Food ministry for all other aspects of food control, though it did not recommend when the latter body should be formed. Finally, the report emphasized contacting trade representatives in the private sphere and coordinating the effort with other ministries, including the Home Office and the yet to be formed shipping and supply ministries, though they did have a presence in the Board of Trade.

Despite its comprehensiveness the report overall was rather vague. It did not, for example, set forth definite procedures or the timing for rationing or import controls. Nor was it always logically organized, since certain areas, such as the food supply issue, were scattered throughout the report. Most importantly, as pointed out by official historian Hammond, its main thrust was on the control of wages, prices, and profits and their relation to inflation rather than on the food shortages that would inevitably occur in wartime. To be sure, both elements were critical, but the question of an adequate food supply still needed to be addressed more fully. The 1933 report was truly interim.

Between 1933 and early 1936 the government began to think in more specific terms. The Manpower Sub-Committee report on prices in September 1933 included a list of consumer items to be controlled and devoted special attention to an organization for a future Food ministry.

60 NS 33, ‘Interim Report on Food’, 23 Feb. 1933, CAB 57/2, PRO.
62 NS 35, ‘Final Report’, 22 Sept. 1933, CAB 57/2, PRO; and [MAF], Minute Sheet, 4-3-35, MAF 43/35, PRO.
In March 1935 the Committee of Imperial Defence had drawn up a list of specific agriculture-related jobs that would be deferred in wartime. Later in the spring the government reaffirmed that separate committees be set up in the Board of Trade to deal with food supplies in wartime and in the Ministry of Agriculture for domestic food production. Most of the Board of Trade committee was to come from the Civil Emergency Food Organisation, that of the Agriculture committee from its personnel in Whitehall. Although the Agriculture ministry was responsible only for England and Wales, from the start it was in close contact with Scotland’s Department of Agriculture and Northern Ireland’s Ministry of Agriculture. Also from the start, both committees made extensive use of their trading and rural constituencies outside the government.

The government’s Sub-Committees took up two additional food and war related issues in the autumn of 1935. In September a Sub-Committee on the Distribution of Imports in Time of War reported on the problem of port capacity in Britain if those on the eastern and south-eastern coasts could not be used. When the Abyssinian War broke out in October, a Sub-Committee of the Principal Supply Officers Committee initiated ‘a general discussion of anticipatory purchases in relation to the present emergency’. One of the areas discussed was, of course, the purchase of food.

The continuation of the Abyssinian conflict and the Rhineland remilitarization in March 1936 brought a flurry of activity. On 7 April the Board of Trade’s Sub-Committee on Food Supply in Time of War, formed eleven months earlier, began issuing a series of important reports. In this particular one the Sub-Committee described five areas of concern and the departments presumed to be responsible for each area. First was ‘security of import trade at sea’, which was to be primarily directed by the Admiralty, although the Air ministry was also to be involved. Second was ‘security of merchant ships and cargoes in port’, which was also to be under the purview of the armed services, in this case the navy and army. The area was further to include air raid precautions, which was to be assigned to a civilian department. Third

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64 EOF(W)11, ‘Summary Provisional Report and Observation’, 13 Sept. 1935, MAF 72/83, PRO; and PSO(AP), 9th Meeting, 7 Oct. 1935, CAB 60/24, PRO.

65 FS 2, ‘Note by Secretary’, 7 Apr. 1936, CAB 16/157, PRO.
was ‘distribution of food from the ports’, in which the responsible body was to take advantage of the work done by the previously mentioned Sub-Committee on the Distribution of Imports in Time of War, headed by Sir Cuthbert Headlam. Fourth was ‘control of foodstuffs’, which was to be under the Board of Trade, or, if necessary, under a Ministry of Food. One of the Board of Trade’s immediate concerns was to set up a Sub-Committee for food rationing. Fifth, and finally, was ‘home production of food’, for which the Ministry of Agriculture and its counterparts in Scotland and Northern Ireland were to be responsible.

One day later, on the 8th, a new committee, the Committee on Trade and Agriculture, was instituted. It was to be chaired by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Neville Chamberlain, and it consisted of the heads of the major ministries, including Walter Elliot from Agriculture and Sir Walter Runciman from the Board of Trade. Its charge was to consider matters to be taken up in forthcoming trade negotiations with the Scandinavian and other Baltic countries, but from the beginning the committee enlarged its brief to discuss food-related trade that might apply to all the pertinent nations, including the Dominions and the United States.

On the 22nd the Board of Trade’s Food Supply in Time of War Sub-Committee set out a comprehensive report. It was an exceedingly important document which detailed what had been accomplished in the area to date, and what needed to be accomplished in the future. In the what had been accomplished category the report listed three things. One was that the government had ascertained ‘the sources and nature of available information’. In this regard the Sub-Committee now had price data on all the essential foodstuffs in the United Kingdom. These prices pertained to the following primarily imported goods: animal products, beverages (alcoholic and non-alcoholic), cereals and legumes, edible oils and fats, eggs, feed stuff (for animals), fish, fruits and vegetables, and sugar. The data were to provide the basis for the home production, import, distribution, storage, and consumption decisions the government would have to make in wartime or possibly before a war broke out.

Another already accomplished task was ‘the establishment of a panel of expert Trade Advisers’. The government had made use of

66 TAC(36), 8 Apr. 1936, CAB 27/620, PRO, and TAC(36), 1st Meeting, 9 Apr. 1936, CAB 27/619, PRO.
67 FS(BT 35), 22 Apr. 1936, CAB 16/157, PRO, and FP(MA)8(Revise), ‘Report of Committee on Food Production in the Time of War’, 23 Apr. 1936, CAB 16/157, PRO.
trade advisers during the Great War and also in the 1920s and 1930s when civil disturbances had arisen. The current list included individuals for each major product, such as representatives from Smithfield’s for meat, from the Milk Marketing Boards for fresh milk, and so forth.

The third thing the Sub-Committee had done was to convert ‘the local Food Organisation into an organisation that could be used for purposes of defence as well as civil emergency’. Like the trade adviser group, the local organizations had been in existence for a number of years. In the 1920s and 1930s they had pertained only to England and Wales, but they were readily expandable to Scotland and Northern Ireland as well. At this point it consisted of thirteen divisional officers, many of them local notables, but seven of the positions were unfilled. The divisions were further subdivided into 183 local areas. As stated in the report, ‘The Divisional Officers and their assistants, many of whom served in the Ministry of Food [in World War I], would be used as the eyes and ears of the Government throughout the country in a period of emergency . . . ’. The ‘period of emergency’ phrase was included because the government continued to be vague about when exactly the procedures being recommended should come into effect. Should it be, as was officially accepted, only after war had broken out? Or should it be anytime a crisis, which might escalate into war, had erupted? This problem the government later decided could only be resolved on a case-by-case basis.

When the Sub-Committee turned to ‘future work’ the list was longer but less detailed. It covered the following issues:

(1) Food requirements. These were defined as ‘the minimum supplies of foodstuffs which should be available in war’. The relevant departments—Agriculture, Health, and the Board of Trade—were to determine the amount and cost(!) of each product needed.

(2) Maintenance and Conservation of Supplies. In this instance the relevant departments were to anticipate the extent to which war would interrupt the flow of imports from abroad. If this indeed happened then the departments should consider the steps to be taken before rather than after hostilities began.

(3) Food Production. The report did not really address the domestic production, but on the 23rd the Agriculture ministry issued its own report, which emphasized ‘increasing supplies of home grown food’, though only after the war had started. The ministry also anticipated using the marketing boards and county committees for administration and oversight.
(4) Food Stocks. The Sub-Committee waffled on food storage and stockpiling because of its reluctance to interfere with the normal flow of imports before a war broke out. The final relevant sentence in the report is a wonderful example of prevarication and wishful thinking. It reads:

If it were decided, as a matter of necessity or for the purpose of establishing public confidence in peace as well as in war, that it was desirable for a minimum level of stocks to be maintained in the case of certain commodities [i.e., stockpiling], the possibility might be explored of persuading the trades themselves to carry somewhat larger stocks than usual without cost to the State.

(5) Trade Control. Trade control was at the heart of a comprehensive food policy, for the Sub-Committee defined it to include ‘the control of production, exports and imports, purchase, requisition, price-fixing and regulation of distribution’. As expected, the Board of Trade was to look after all aspects of control, except for home production, which was to be under Agriculture. The report also mentioned that the government would be able to make use of the Wheat Commission, Marketing Boards, and Cattle Committees, which had come into existence earlier in the decade.

(6) Rationing of Consumer. This was the final part of the puzzle. Since it was complicated, the report recommended, as it had two weeks earlier, that a Sub-Committee be formed of the departments involved—the Board of Trade, Agriculture, and Health. The Sub-Committee was to consider the necessary arrangements for bringing rationing ‘into force as quickly as possible in an emergency’. The report did not indicate which products might be rationed, but it did say that ‘by the end of the Great War rationing had been applied to bacon, cheese, ham, lard, margarine, meat, sugar and tea’.

The Board of Trade’s 22 April 1936 report was a turning point in that it contained the basic ingredients for framing a food policy in wartime. The Committee for Imperial Defence accepted it in May.68 At this point the government realized that what remained to be done was to determine the specific administrative measures required to implement the issues raised. What the government did not appreciate, however, was the extent to which the ongoing peacetime problems in food, and especially in agriculture, would be enfolded into rearment as the latter emerged as the government’s dominant concern during the last half of the decade.

68 Murray, _Agriculture_, 48–9.
Before turning to the period between April 1936 and the outbreak of the war one further concern needs to be addressed: the continuing debate over how to stop the decline in agriculture. The issue had bedevilled rural Britain, except for World War I, for generations. By the 1930s the problem seemed to have reached overwhelming proportions, and this had happened despite agriculture’s decreasing importance in Britain’s economy. To solve the problem various groups and individuals put forth a variety of solutions, which ran the gamut politically from right to left with all shades of opinion, including single-issue advocates, in between.

Both major parties professed concern for the plight of the farmer, but neither of them had a truly unified position.69 The Conservatives for the most part favoured direct support and tariffs, but never completely or consistently. They advocated subsidies for wheat and cattle farmers, for instance, but not for other farmers, and the government’s tariff policy applied only to certain food products, and it kept tariffs low (non-existent for the Dominions) so as not to upset unduly the nation’s import/export trade. The party’s increasingly close partner, the National Farmers’ Union, agreed with what the government was doing, but wanted higher tariffs and preferred subsidies only as a last resort. Where the NFU really parted company with the Conservatives, however, was over the level of production. Whereas the Conservatives were willing to support more production only to a point—again because of overseas trade considerations—the farmers’ union strongly favoured unlimited production at a fair price as a long-term solution to their depressed condition. The party and NFU never reconciled the disagreement satisfactorily until the war intervened and increased domestic production became the order of the day.

Labour’s position was more consistent in that it always advocated nationalization of the land. Yet the party faced a number of problems in its attempt to deal with the issue. One was that even though the agricultural labour unions accepted nationalization, it was never, as mentioned earlier, popular in the countryside as a whole. Another problem was that while the party’s intellectual leaders also accepted nationalization, they all seemed to have different ways of getting there—from ownership over a number of years to farming cooperatives to tenancy under governmental auspices. Finally, Labour was not in power, and it

considered other issues, such as opposing tariffs and reducing unemployment, more pressing than land nationalization. It might someday come to pass, but not in the immediate future.

Among the individuals advocating solutions to agriculture’s woes, the foremost voice on the right was Viscount Gerard Lymington, who, during the period, appeared numerous times at public forums and wrote widely on the subject. His main idea was that for farmers to prosper, they had to be allowed to increase production in all areas from grain and livestock to fruits and vegetables. While the goal of self-sufficiency could not be reached at once—Lymington estimated it would take forty years—it would none the less be worth the effort. To arrive at this point the farmer had to be a good steward and devoted to developing the soil’s fertility. This did not mean governmental intervention, however, because ‘production is being subsidized at the expense of fertility’. In Lymington’s opinion the farmer could best look after his own needs, but only insofar as he was willing to follow sound practices and thus bring ‘health’ to the land. By reviving the land Britain could reduce its dependence on food imports, obtain better prices for the farmer, and have more workers tilling the soil. The entire nation would benefit from such a programme.

On the left the most influential spokesman was Christopher Addison. Although it will be recalled that he had lost his post as Minister of Agriculture after the 1931 election, he continued to be in demand as a speaker and writer across the country. Like others in the Labour party he professed ‘national ownership of agricultural land’. The way to accomplish it, in his view, was to buy it from the present owners, but at a fair price. The procedure was to work as follows. Once the total worth of the land had been determined—for Addison, the figure for England and Wales would be £1.125 billion—the government would pay the former owners for the land over a twenty-year period. The money was to come from the persons, whether new or old, now farming the land, to whom the government would give land bonds equal to the full value of the land as determined by a valuation department. The

70 Viscount Lymington [Gerard Wallop], Famine in England (London, 1938), and The Times, 9 Nov. 1936, 18.
farmer would then pay the government redemption payments plus interest, with which the government would pay the former owners. But the new owner would be the government. Still, the government was to be a good landlord. It was obligated to guarantee the farmer a fair price for his goods; control imports of agricultural products; encourage up-to-date farming methods; and provide modern equipment, better wages for workers, and better housing, including running water and electricity. Following these practices, the farming community would prosper.

While agreeing with Addison on the importance of nationalization, two other highly respected individuals, Sir Daniel Hall and Charles Orwin, proposed different approaches to the subject. Both Hall and Orwin are interesting in their own right, for Hall was one of the premier agricultural scientists of the period, and Orwin was the long-time director of the Agricultural Economics Institute at Oxford. But the pertinent point for us is that Hall proposed that the state take over the land and have it reorganized into large units so that modern methods and equipment could best be utilized.72 The land would then be let to tenants, who would till it and still be allowed to make profits from it. In other words, the government would pay for the land, but farmers would reap the rewards. Farmers would work with government, which along with the business community, would provide the marketing and technological expertise to help the farmer achieve a good living and a rewarding life.

Orwin’s solution was what he called the National Estate.73 From his viewpoint the land would end up under state control, but only gradually. The land would then be rented to tenants, but as opposed to Hall, Orwin’s tenant would work for the state. The entire nation would benefit, but the former marketing mechanism would give way to governmental control. Both Orwin’s and Hall’s schemes were obviously too radical for most British farmers.

Though less comprehensive than the proposals of Lymington, Addison, Hall, or Orwin, there were also a number of other ideas that still had an influence on the agricultural scene.74 John Baugh, who owned

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73 Charles S. Orwin, *Speed the Plough* (Harmondsworth, 1942). This book summarized what Orwin was writing and saying in the 1930s.

74 John Baugh, *Agriculture: A Long-Term Policy* (London, 1938), and Arthur W. Ashby,
7,000 acres of farmland in Hampshire, advocated ‘cheap food with security’. To accomplish this the government was to set up a commission that would guarantee farmers, especially cattle and wheat farmers, a ‘reasonable return of profit’. At the same time the commission would establish food reserves which would assure at least a nine-month supply of essential products. The idea of food reserves was worked out in detail by Professor Arthur Ashby, who took into account shipping and imports as well as domestic measures in dealing with the issue. Ashby’s and Baugh’s thinking was being considered by the government as early as 1936.

G. Goddard Watts thought the solution to agriculture’s problems was tied in with public awareness.\(^7^5\) If townspeople understood that a thriving agriculture was in their best interest, they would support it. In Watts’s view, not only did agriculture benefit the country economically. It also benefited the country sociologically, in that the farming community personified Britain’s best qualities—‘the resourcefulness, the self-reliance, and the reserves of character that spring from working with nature and understanding her.’ In fact, according to Watts, agricultural and urban wages ought to be on a par, for agriculture ‘is more than a profession. It is a way of life . . .’.

Another issue was tied in with current concerns—in this instance, the Depression. The issue was to provide labour for the unemployed by settling them on the land. As brought out earlier, parliament had passed a land act to this effect in 1934, thus reflecting the desires of numerous individuals and groups, particularly on the left, who advocated land settlement schemes.\(^7^6\) A few of the settlements took the form of cooperatives, but most were single family smallholdings administered by governmental officials. One such experiment was set up in eastern Scotland. It consisted of seventy-seven farms of five to eight acres, which the occupiers rented from the government. A report in 1937 indicated the operations were not working out especially well. Some of the new farmers, especially those with farming experience, were making a profit, but most of them were not. In other words, they were finding that farm life was also a hard life.

\(^4^6\) The background


\(^7^6\) Cooper, *British Agricultural Policy*, 46–7; Lord Astor to W. H. Senior, 19 Apr. 1935, AF 43/372, SRO; and [Report], 13 Apr. 1937, AF 43/372, SRO.
The most talked about food-related issue at the time was nutrition. The interest was primarily through the efforts of one person, Sir John Boyd Orr, whose 1936 study, *Food, Health and Income*, caused a sensation. To be sure, Orr was only one of a number of scientists studying nutrition, but his findings were particularly striking. The director of Aberdeen’s Rowett Institute and his staff had examined the diet of more than 1,200 families selected from six different income groups. He then extrapolated his results as representative of Britain’s approximately 45 million people. He found that the 4.5 million in the lowest economic group, or 10 per cent of the population, and 20 per cent of all children, had a totally deficient diet. In addition, the 18 million in the next two groups had a diet deficient in vitamins and minerals. This meant overall that 50 per cent of the population suffered from a poor diet. As Orr put it, ‘According to the estimate given here, the diet of nearly one-half of the population, though sufficient to satisfy hunger, is deficient for health’. Though criticized for taking too small a sample and for applying too high a standard in defining nutritional needs, his evidence was substantiated by other studies, and the shock value of Orr’s work caused concern in high places throughout the land.

A subsequent study led Orr to decrease the percentage of people with deficient diets to 33 per cent, but the message still was clear: too many people in Britain suffered from poor nutrition. Although not always appreciated by farm groups, Orr and other food and agricultural scientists continued to push their agendas not only to like-minded thinkers but in the political arena as well.

An additional issue that gained in significance as the decade unfolded, and our major concern, was the tie between food and national security. Baugh and Ashby had focused on one aspect, the storage question, but others now began to look at the many possible linkages that would come into being in wartime. Frederick Clark and Richard Titmuss in particular in their book *Our Food Problem: A Study in National Security*, addressed many of the pertinent issues from import controls and increased domestic grain production to cutting down on meat (because of less animal feed) to better mechanization and more farm

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workers. For consumers, they called for a more ample diet, an adequate food supply, and fair prices for the goods consumers bought. The authors were further concerned about a ‘fit nation’, because in their view, only a physically fit nation eating nutritious food could survive the rigours of modern war.

An individual who brought together many of the ideas we have been discussing about how to overcome the crisis in agriculture was Viscount Waldorf Astor. Lord Astor has most often been associated with ‘the Cliveden set’, a group of like-minded aristocrats who met at Astor’s Berkshire estate, Cliveden, and who espoused not only pro appeasement but more especially pro-fascist sentiments. Whatever one’s opinion of Astor’s role in the discussions—and it is not always clear how heavily he was involved—he was actually more concerned about agriculture and its importance in British life. Although somewhat of a dilettante in agricultural matters, he had money and was well connected with most of the country’s business and political leaders. He also had the good sense to draw upon expert advice to assist him in his endeavours. The result was a series of three books in which Astor and collaborators—in one case, Keith Murray, in the two others, B. Seebohm Rowntree and a committee of experts—set forth their views on how best to breathe new life into British agriculture.

Astor’s book with Murray, an outstanding agricultural economist, was entitled *Land and Life: The Economic National Policy for Agriculture*, and published in 1932. It was a practical book that focused on ways for agriculture to get out of the depression and yet look ahead. The authors based their national policy on four factors. The first was production. They realized there was no possibility of self-sufficiency, but imports needed to be controlled at least temporarily. At home, livestock and dairying should be emphasized to take advantage of cheap feed stuff. On the other hand, wheat and sugar beets, which were benefiting from subsidies, should be de-emphasized, though wheat should still be helped with increased mechanization. Sugar beets, however, had proved uneconomical as a result of a collapse on the world sugar market. A final agricultural industry to be promoted—and Astor and Murray were adamant that agriculture was an industry with many sub-industries—was domestic fruits and vegetables for reasons of nutrition.

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78 Frederick Le Gros Clark and Richard M. Titmuss, *Our Food Problem: A Study in National Security* (Harmondsworth, 1939) and Boyd Orr Papers, Box 1, File 1, 7 June 1939, NLS.
The second factor of their policy was to encourage small landholdings, which would increase the rural population and offset the expected losses from mechanization. Third, the government needed to provide agriculture with ‘fresh capital’ to make up for the loss of capital through taxation, which had been particularly ruinous to large landowners. And finally, the farmer was to receive indirect help through grants for research, education, and marketing incentives. Following these precepts, Astor and Murray predicted British agriculture would enjoy ‘high employment, high food production, and real efficiency’.

Astor’s second book, *The Agricultural Dilemma*, was published in 1935 with co-author Seebohm Rowntree. Rowntree was the head of the York chocolate firm, but his main interest was dealing with social problems. In 1934 Rowntree had set up a committee to examine the malaise in agriculture, and the new book was the result of the committee’s preliminary findings. It did not, however, echo Astor’s and Murray’s earlier concerns—except that increased wheat production should not be encouraged—because conditions had changed. As they stated, ‘It is now clear [in 1935] that we have suffered during the world depression less severely than most other countries, and far less severely than the United States in particular’. According to the authors, British agriculture should continue to be subsidized but only for nutritional reasons and in the name of efficiency. Otherwise, encouraging domestic production would be counter-productive, since it would diminish foreign trade and also the merchant marine industry. The only reason they could see for building up domestic agriculture was for security reasons. Thus, as early as 1935, Astor and Rowntree already accepted that increased home production—and stockpiling—would be necessary in a wartime environment.

By 1938, when Astor and Rowntree’s second book, *British Agriculture: The Principles of Future Policy*, came out, the security problem loomed ever larger. At this point they accepted increased production, but realized that food imports would still be required. In their opinion the questions that needed to be answered were, what could British agriculture produce most effectively and economically, and, given these

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81 Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture: The Principles of Future Policy* (London, 1938); Briggs, *Social Thought*, 218–20; and Boyd Orr Papers, Box 1, File 1, 16 Nov. 1938, NLS.
criteria, what foods did the British citizen need most that could be produced domestically? The answer could be found in health-protective foods as distinct from energy-based foods. In the former category were milk, fresh fruit, vegetables, and eggs, and foremost among them was fresh milk. Even so, the marketing boards that marketed milk had to be transformed into a state- rather than a producer-run operation, and this should be the case for all marketing boards, since they had brought high prices that were not in the consumers’ best interest. As for the energy-building foods, such as wheat, sugar beets, and cattle, subsidies should remain in effect, but they should be reduced, and for sugar beets eliminated altogether.

Astor’s and Rowntree’s other proposals also harked back to earlier recommendations. Though smallholdings were no longer to be encouraged, the government should establish a Land Improvement Commission to acquire land and then improve it so as to make it more productive. This might even require dispossessing ineffective landowners, though in these instances (it had happened in World War I) ‘the State should proceed on cautious and tentative lines’. The authors further proposed more liberal provisions for research into the technological and economic problems in agriculture, and farmers should take advantage of scientific agriculture to bring about higher yields and greater production. As a final step, they proposed an improved life for agricultural workers in the areas of housing, health services, and education.

In summing up the work of Astor and his collaborators, obviously not everyone agreed with their proposals. Nevertheless, their books touched on almost all the issues, and their perception of agriculture took into account the alterations Britain was going through in the 1930s. The changes they advocated were especially pertinent when it came to rearmament, and to their credit Astor and his collaborators adapted their thinking on food and agriculture to take security into account. As brought out earlier, the government was thinking along similar lines.

Therefore, by early 1936—and the April 1936 report was the defining document—a Board of Trade Sub-Committee had laid out the food and agricultural issues Britain would have to face in time of war and had recommended ways to deal with them. In addition, the nation had adopted tariffs, which were especially critical in terms of food imports, but the government was adjusting to the change and was grappling with what it would mean during an ‘emergency’. The
government further realized that increased domestic production
would be an obvious priority, but it would have its limits. Nevertheless,
the decline in agriculture had to be reversed, and a number of solutions
had been proposed. Some of them addressed the food/security
relationship, others did not; but most of their ideas could be adapted to
wartime situations. The government also believed that the processors,
distributors, and retailers had to be made aware of what might happen,
and a number of them had been contacted. With regard to the troops
themselves, the services had discussed their needs, but it was still very
tentative, since no one had any precise notion as to the number of
soldiers, sailors, and air personnel that might be involved and where
they would be located. Even so, the establishment of procedures and
the setting up of an apparatus for dealing with food and agriculture in
case war should break out was about to begin.
CHAPTER THREE

The Pace Quickens, 1936–1938

Planning in food defence was as essential as planning in any other form of defence.

William Morrison

Between mid-1936 and late 1938 changes in Britain’s food sector and its relation to rearmament is best described as meaningful and methodical, but not undertaken at a frantic pace. Even after the Czech crisis, which sent shock waves throughout the country, governmental officials did not panic but continued to build on the procedures they had worked out during the previous two years.

The same can be said of the nation as a whole. It was attempting to cope with the heightened tensions on the international scene, but glimmers of hope had been few and far between. While the Abyssinian war had ended and Nazi Germany had put on its best face at the 1936 summer Olympics, civil war in Spain had broken out in July, and it was causing reverberations across Europe and to an extent around the globe. Added to this, in 1937 war had erupted between Japan and China, and it obviously threatened British interests in that part of the world. Then in March 1938 the Germans had successfully isolated Austria, forced a diplomatic settlement, and taken it over. The following September Hitler had brought Europe to the brink of war. It had been averted because Britain and France had backed down, and despite the diplomatic niceties the Western Powers had in effect ceded Czechoslovakia’s Sudetenland to the expanding German Reich.

Inside Britain the mood was changing and the government’s attitude was changing, too. To be sure, there were still ongoing problems, foremost being the Depression, but the government’s focus was shifting primarily to the international threat. Because of the importance of these two major concerns, the Depression and international tensions, it will be helpful to discuss each of them briefly before examining the food sector during this period.
Regarding the Depression, conditions were improving. In 1937
domestic output was up 25 per cent from what it had been in 1932, do-
monic investment up 50 per cent, employment 17 per cent.1 Even
though unemployment remained too high, it had dropped to
1,766,000, or 8.5 per cent, in 1937. It had risen again to over two million
because of a sharp recession in late 1937 and early 1938, but was re-
bounding again by the end of the year. In other words, while the
Depression and its effects lingered, the worst was over.

Regarding the international troubles, the government saw it within
the framework of three separate yet interdependent strands: finance,
foreign policy, and defence.2 First was finance. In fact, from the stand-
point of Neville Chamberlain, who had become Prime Minister in
May 1937 after Baldwin’s retirement, finance was at the centre of the
nation’s comprehensive policy. In his view, it was the duty of the Treas-
ury to keep the lid on rearmament even as it gained momentum. While
not opposed to an armaments build-up per se, the former Chancellor
of the Exchequer simply did not want it done imprudently.

What were the alternatives? Excessive borrowing would create in-
flationary pressures, which would, in turn, lead to more imports and
less exports and thus exacerbate the already weak balance of payments
situation. A further consequence might well be a loss of confidence in
Britain’s short-term Treasury notes which would lead to a fall in its gold
reserves. Raising taxes would not provide the solution either, for it
would bring about an increase in unemployment. Having rejected the
above alternatives, the government decided the way out of the diffi-
culty was for the Treasury to allow for rearmament, but only within fi-
nancial limits. While the armed services would undoubtedly be upset
with this method of rearming, for it would require them to be selective,
Chamberlain saw it as promoting economic stability, which would re-
sult in the nation being rearmed in a responsible manner. He and his
Treasury associates even believed economic stability would remind
potential enemies of Britain’s deterrent power.

1 John Stevenson and Chris Cook, Britain in the Depression: Society and Politics, 1929–1939
(New York, 1990), 5–9; and C. H. Feinstein, National Income, Expenditure and Output of the United

2 Michael M. Postan, British War Production (London, 1952), 25–30; George C. Peden,
British Reramarment and the Treasury, 1932–1939 (Edinburgh, 1979), 10–13; and R. A. C. Parker,
‘Economics, Reramarment and Foreign Policy: The United Kingdom before 1939—A Pre-
In a sense, Chamberlain and the Treasury were right, for the British industrial infrastructure was in no position to undertake unlimited rearmament, and the balance of payments problem served as a further brake. But, in a sense, the government’s position was short-sighted, especially when the main prospective enemy, Germany, was rearming at a prodigious rate. The figures tell the story. Despite the fact that Britain was spending four times as much on defence in 1938 as it had in 1934, £473 million as opposed to £119 million, it was still only 7 per cent of the country’s GNP. By contrast, in the same year, 1938, Germany was spending 17 per cent, and its percentage differential with Britain between 1934 and 1937 had been even greater. Only in 1939 did the government acknowledge its error and cast off the financial restraints it had imposed upon itself by the Treasury.

The second part of Britain’s policy, foreign relations, has long been equated with the term appeasement. Over the years, our historical appreciation of appeasement has gone through various gyrations, from seeing it as an all-out surrender to the Axis to an understandable reaction because of Britain’s weakness in the 1930s to the normal British reaction of attempting to settle disputes peaceably. While all of these factors were involved, appeasement also had other facets. One was its association with Neville Chamberlain. In recent decades there have been attempts to resurrect this tragic figure, to make him into a pragmatic statesman instead of the person who gave in to Hitler and his bullying until it was almost too late. These attempts at rehabilitation have deepened our understanding of Chamberlain, but they have not exonerated him. We now realize that he favoured appeasement and rearmament, but his belief—and he sincerely believed in peace—that he could settle accounts with Germany short of war was obviously misplaced.

Another facet of Britain’s foreign policy was its relations with the Dominions and Empire. Britain was stretched especially thin because

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3 Peden, British Rearmament, 8, and Howson, Domestic Monetary Management, 122.
Germany’s partners, Italy and Japan, had embarked on their own aggression and posed definite threats to the overseas territories. But at this point Britain was not willing to let go of its Empire, and it hoped that the latter felt the same way. To an extent, the Commonwealth and Empire did, particularly when their interests, as in trade and local defence matters, coincided with those of Britain. When it came to Europe, however, the empire’s nations were much more reluctant to do what the British wanted. In short, their interests and those of Britain were not always the same.

The third part of Britain’s policy was, of course, defence. As mentioned before, as early as 1934, the government started to think seriously about rearmament. In March 1935 it made public its decision to rearm. From the beginning, it assumed that a future war would be a long one requiring a total economic effort and full-scale mobilization. Such an effort would obviously take time, for the government had to build up the nation’s industrial capacity, convert civilian industry to military production, and secure its overseas supply of basic strategic materials.

In 1935 the process began. At first, the Royal Air Force, the ‘golden service’ as Norman Gibbs has put it, received top priority, but in 1936 the other services started as well. Also in 1936, the government financed a ‘shadow factory’ scheme by which British industries, such as Austin, Rover, and Wolseley, built factories to produce aircraft. At the same time, the government financed the expansion of the chemical and munitions industries, let numerous contracts, and further expanded the Royal Dockyards.

As the government programme picked up steam, so did the economy. In 1938, for instance, employment increased by about 1½ million jobs, and 80 per cent of them related to rearmament. Even so, the
government showed no inclination to extend controls over industry, at least during peacetime. The reasons were what one would expect in a capitalist society. The government believed in the virtues of a market economy, lacked the organization to control industry, and depended on cooperation from the manufacturing sector. But there was another reason in the background: if the government took control, what might a future Labour government do with such powers? To the Conservatives, this was a frightening prospect. To be sure, virtually everyone accepted that controls in time of war would be necessary, but that would take place only if and when war broke out. Thus, the government made a clear distinction between rearmament in peacetime and directing an economy at war.

The institutions delegated to make the rearmament decisions were public and private. The public sector consisted of a series of committees with the cabinet at the apex. Heading the military side of the government was the previously mentioned Committee of Imperial Defence, chaired by the Prime Minister, and the Chiefs of Staff Committee. Under them were additional advisory committees, including, among others, Principal Supply Officers, Manpower, Defence Plans (Policy), and Defence Policy and Requirements. The last was particularly influential with Sir Robert Vansittart of the Foreign Office; Sir Warren Fisher of the ubiquitous Treasury; Sir Maurice Hankey, the CID secretary; and the three service chiefs among its members. In March 1936 Sir Thomas Inskip became Minister for the Coordination of Defence to bring the rearmament effort together. While Inskip exerted some influence, the key person in the system was Hankey. He and his staff served as secretaries on all the various committees, and he seemed to have his fingers on the entire defence set-up from weapons procurement to personnel requirements to policy formulation. As Lawrence Pratt has pointed out, Hankey dominated ‘the amorphous but actually highly centralized “defence by committee” policy-making apparatus’.

As with all systems, the first task of the committees was to develop a policy. Once that had been accomplished, priorities were to flow from the agreed-upon policy. This was not as easy as it might seem. Each service had its own priorities, and given Treasury restraints, not all of

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them could be fulfilled even by ordering armaments from overseas. In-
skip and his colleagues tried to bring some order to the process, espe-
cially in light of the interservice bickering, by issuing a report in
December 1937. It set forth four priorities that were to guide the nation
as it rearmed.\textsuperscript{10} First was defence of the home islands; second, control
of the sea lanes; third, defence of the empire; and fourth, other com-
mitments. Although the priorities did have some positive features, such
as an emphasis on fighter aircraft and radar, it relegated the army to
home defence and imperial duties. This meant that preparations for
combat on the Continent were in the ‘other’ category and thus in
fourth place. Fortunately, the priorities were overtaken by events, but
it does indicate the difficulty the government had in setting realistic
priorities.

The second half of the rearmament effort was the private sector. It
was almost as vital as the government itself, for the latter depended on
civilian experts and their facilities as well.\textsuperscript{11} The resulting committees
were made up of manufacturing leaders from throughout the country.
One example was Lord Weir’s committee, which was exceedingly in-
fluential in stimulating aircraft production and in helping establish the
shadow factories. Another was in Scotland, which had its own Eco-
nomic Committee of leading businessmen. Among their tasks was to
encourage light engineering firms to accept contracts for munitions-
making. Furthermore, company executives not yet on committees also
at times demonstrated the desire to assist the government. Lord
Woolton, the chair of Lewis’s Liverpool-based department stores, for
instance, stopped trading with Germany in the wake of its takeover of
Austria. Without business’s good will, the rearmament programme
would have floundered.

Still, how effective was Britain’s committee system? There has been
a good deal of criticism of it.\textsuperscript{12} The main criticism is that it was slow and

\textsuperscript{10} See, among others, R. J. Q. Adams, \textit{British Politics and Foreign Policy in the Age of Appease-

Housing and Health Department (HHD), ‘Report by Economics Committee of the Scottish
Development Council, 1936–1937’, June 1937, HH 36/117, SRO; and Lord Woolton
[Sir Frederick Marquis], \textit{Memoirs} (London, 1959), 130.

\textsuperscript{12} Williamson Murray, \textit{The Changes in the European Balance of Power, 1938–1939: The Path to
Ruin} (Princeton, NJ, 1984), 55–6; Gaines Post, Jr., \textit{Dilemmas of Appeasement: British Deterrence
and Defense, 1934–1937} (Ithaca, NY, 1992), 1–21; and Richard Neustadt, ‘White House and
Whitehall’, in Richard Rose (ed.), \textit{Policy-Making in Britain: A Reader in Government} (New York,
led to procrastination at a time when more resolute decision-making was called for. True, the top civil servants who ran it were intelligent, confident (some would say haughty) individuals, and Chamberlain did exercise a firmer hand than his predecessor after he became prime minister. When it came to defence matters, however, policy-making by committee did not seem to result in timely decisions.

On the other hand, in keeping with a democracy, the British system was not meant to be rapid. Its strength was in having committees consider a variety of diverse views before adopting common policies. It was, moreover, meant to be somewhat of a mystery, where the relationship between the political leadership and the officials who served the government was obscure, if not exactly hidden, from the public at large. But this was the system, and Britain’s elite and the citizenry, who exercised ultimate authority through elections, accepted it as the way government should function.

The committee system was also much in evidence in food and agriculture as these industries (and they were always referred to as industries, in keeping with Britain’s manufacturing emphasis) began to align themselves with rearmament. In fact, from April 1936 on, when the Board of Trade’s Sub-Committee on Food Supply had set forth the elements for a wartime food policy, most of the parliamentary and governmental activities associated with food and agriculture related in one form or another to the nation’s rearmament programme.

Between mid-1936 and late 1938 there were eight major legislative acts, committee reports and actions, and events that had a significant impact on the preparations for war in the food and agricultural sectors. Of the eight, only two—the Unemployment Insurance Act of 1936 and the Livestock Industry Bill of 1937—were not directly related to rearmament, but to previous concerns. In the case of the unemployment act, it included a provision to extend benefits to farm workers and their families, a provision not contained in earlier legislation. The Livestock bill filled out previous measures by adding to the subsidy provided for cattle, placing further restrictions on meat imports, and empowering the Livestock Commission to consolidate cattle marketing operations. As it turned out, both acts assisted segments of the

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farming community, but they also indirectly affected the rearmament effort by helping to alleviate the farm labour problem and by shoring up the livestock industry.

All the other six developments were directly related to preparing for the eventuality of war. First and second were two committees called for in the April 1936 report. One, headed by Sir William Beveridge, of later Beveridge Report fame, was to establish a scheme for food rationing. The other, chaired by Sir Ernest Gowers, was to propose commodities that needed to be stored before hostilities ever broke out. Third were the activities in the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries that led to the 1937 Agriculture Act along with other rearmament concerns, such as increased home production and labour considerations on farms during wartime. Fourth was the formation of the Food (Defence Plans) Department in the Board of Trade in November 1936. Food (Defence Plans), with Henry L. French as its Director, became the main engine in preparing the food sector for war. Should war become a reality, it was to become the Food ministry.

Fifth and sixth were two major events that occurred in 1938. One was Prime Minister Chamberlain’s 2 July speech at Kettering, which stressed a continuing reliance on imported food rather than on domestic production. The speech had a chilling effect and caused repercussions throughout the farming community. Even more meaningful was the September Munich crisis, which was so serious that actual steps were taken to put the food industry—and the nation—on a wartime footing. The so-called ‘emergency’ passed, but officials learned a great deal from the experience, lessons that might well be put to use if necessary later on.

The principal committee that oversaw the preparations was the Committee for Imperial Defence’s Food Supply in Time of War Sub-Committee. The CID body is not to be confused with the Board of Trade’s Sub-Committee of the same name—the latter had issued the April 1936 report—but the CID group was more broadly based. It included, among others, the First Sea Lord; the Chief of the Air Staff; the Lord Privy Seal, Viscount Halifax; and the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, William Morrison, as well as the President of the Board of Trade and the Minister of Agriculture, Walter Elliot. Thus Morrison and Elliot were involved in policy-making and oversight at this high level, and their contributions justified their inclusion. Chairing the Sub-Committee was Sir Thomas Inskip, the recently selected Minister for the Coordination of Defence, and Colonel Hankey served as secretary.
The committee met periodically between May 1936 and April 1939. At its first meeting on 4 May, it took up many of the issues brought up in the Board of Trade’s April report.\textsuperscript{15} They ranged from issues related directly to defence, such as protection of the nation’s ports, to increasing domestic food production, but the Sub-Committee considered the most pressing issue to be food storage and rationing. The committee decided to have procedures set up for rationing first.

It was good that the government had decided on the Food Supply Sub-Committee, for throughout the period, the spring of 1936, members of parliament, as they have a tendency to do, were goading the government to action. Robert Boothby, one of Churchill’s associates, was particularly adamant in questioning the government about its food plans. (Boothby became Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Food when Churchill took over the government in May 1940.) On 3 March 1936 Boothby asked Prime Minister Baldwin ‘whether, in considering defence requirements, the Government is reviewing the question of the potential supplies of food which can be produced in this country’?\textsuperscript{16} Baldwin replied, as the government has a tendency to do, that ‘the question of home production of foodstuffs in time of war is under review’. Then to inject a note of levity, and to play on his Scottish background, Boothby added: ‘Will the Prime Minister bear in mind the fact that two of the cheapest and most nutritious articles of food are oatmeal and herring’? Baldwin answered: ‘I would say herring, oats, and beef.’

Boothby continued his questioning in the weeks following. Later in March and on 2 April he again asked whether ‘immediate steps’ were being taken to increase home production and whether a special committee had been set up to examine food supplies in time of war?\textsuperscript{17} At this point the Sub-Committee had not yet been formed, and Baldwin’s reply was, ‘I do not think the appointment of a special committee is necessary’. Boothby asked virtually the same question on the 22nd and the 29th, but even though the government by this time had decided to have such a committee, Baldwin sidestepped the issue by saying that ‘responsibility for [food] policy rests with the Government as a whole’.

Only on May 27 did Inskip, in response to a question from a Captain Gunston, acknowledge that there was a ‘Sub-Committee under the Minister for Coordination of Defence to look into home production,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} FS, 1st Meeting, 4 May 1936, CAB 16/156, PRO.
\item \textsuperscript{16} 309 HC Deb., 1935–6, cols. 1186–7, 3 Mar. 1936.
\item \textsuperscript{17} 301 HC Deb., 1935–6, col. 2118, 2 Apr. 1936; 311 HC Deb., 1935–6, cols. 145–6, 22 Apr. 1936; and 311 HC Deb., 1935–6, cols. 901–3, 29 Apr. 1936.
\end{itemize}
protection of shipping, security in ports, distribution and transportation and reserve stocks'. Inskip also mentioned that Sir William Beveridge’s committee, which he had divulged to the Commons on the 21st, was ‘limited at present to arrangements for rationing’. Had Boothby’s questions—and there were other food/defence questions from a number of MPs—prodced the government to act? The answer is probably not, for it had been investigating the matter for a number of months prior to the spring of 1936. But it does indicate that parliament was continuing to play its vital watchdog role to keep the government ‘on track’.

With regard to the Sub-Committee on rationing, Beveridge’s name had surfaced at the 4 May Food Supply meeting. As recorded in the minutes, Hankey indicated that he had already talked with Sir Horace Hamilton, the Permanent Secretary to the Board of Trade and a member of the Sub-Committee, and both thought Beveridge ‘a suitable candidate’. Hankey then went on to say that ‘he had, in fact, met Sir William the other day and sounded him quite non-commitally as to whether he would be prepared to cooperate in any way on defence problems connected with food? Sir William, though perhaps reluctant, had said that he would not, of course, refuse if asked to do so’. Board of Trade president Runciman then added that ‘Sir William’s previous experience would be invaluable’, and the matter was settled.

Beveridge was an excellent choice. He had been heavily involved in food control during World War I and was director of the London School of Economics at the time of his appointment. He was a pragmatist who liked to get things done, though he was better at working out policy and procedures than implementing them. The nine-person Sub-Committee, which included representatives from Scotland and Northern Ireland, met only three times between 17 June and 6 October, but it carried out its task thoroughly and with dispatch.

Borrowing extensively from World War I precedents, the committee’s report was based on three main principles. First, rationing was

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19 FS, 1st Meeting, 4 May 1936, CAB 16/156, PRO.
only the final stage of a number of stages expected to be imposed as a result of food control during wartime. All the other aspects, such as production and distribution, should be in place before rationing was instituted. Second, it had to be relatively equitable, so that abuses did not become widespread. And third, it had to be administratively workable so that the system would not break down.

Rationing as the final stage obviously involved the question of timing. Should it begin immediately upon the outbreak of war, or later? Although the Sub-Committee addressed the issue, it made no recommendation, except to say that rationing should be implemented only in case of a prolonged shortage or shortages of essential products. The implication was that rationing would not be imposed until some months had elapsed after war had started, though the procedures should be thought through and ready beforehand.

To ensure that rationing was equitable, the committee envisaged the public making use of a number of documents. To start the process there was to be a household application form, which each household was to receive and fill out. The form was to apply to every individual—man, woman, or child—in the household, and it was to name retailers from whom the members of the household were to receive the rationed goods. Since this was before the days of supermarkets, more than one store would normally be selected, a butcher’s shop for meat, a bakery for bread, and so forth.

Each individual was then to be issued a ration book. To make sure that only bona fide persons received the books, the process was to be tied to a national registration scheme. Though outside the purview of the Sub-Committee, national registration was to be undertaken as one of the first steps after a war broke out. It was to give the residence of every individual, and then the appropriate agency was to issue each citizen a registration certificate, which, in turn, would determine who received ration books. National registration was the key element in the scheme, since it would prevent serious abuses.

The Sub-Committee then went into detail on the nature and types of ration books. While the report understandably did not indicate which items were to be rationed, each book was to include coupons for meat, and the rest of the booklet was to consist of undesignated coupons for other possibly rationed goods. Determining the types of ration books, which were to last for six months, was even more complicated. There were to be books for children under six (half rations of meat) and for adults in general. There were also to be special books for adolescent
boys, ‘heavy’ workers, people whose work involved extensive travel, and soldiers on leave. (Expectant mothers and those requiring special diets were among the groups added to the list later.) The report further took into account the needs of ‘establishments’ that dealt with food consumption outside the home, the most obvious being restaurants and institutions, such as hospitals and schools.

The final piece of the rationing puzzle was the retailer, who was to be given a permit to buy the food necessary for his or her registered customers. The permit was to limit the amount of goods the retailer could purchase, not a guarantee of supplies. This matter the Sub-Committee considered could be sorted out at the local level.

The sorting out process was also tied in with the third principle that rationing be administratively workable. Again using World War I as a basis, the Sub-Committee recommended that there be a central office under the yet to be formed Ministry of Food, divisional offices, and local offices (estimated at approximately 1,900). At the local level, food committees were to be established to ensure compliance to regulations and to solve problems, such as adjusting supplies to retailers so as to accord with the number of registered customers, transferring customers from one retailer to another, or dealing with variations in prices.

The divisional officers were to be appointed for England, Wales, Scotland, and all of Ireland. With regard to the last, it is good to remember that the report was written in 1936, but the relevant paragraph is interesting in its own right because of the assumptions it makes. After pointing out that Ireland in the last war was exempted from rationing, the report states:

In a future war, the British Ministry of Food will formally deal with the Irish Free State as with any other Dominion, but will in practice occupy a special position—in so far as the supply of tea, sugar, and other imported food to Ireland will largely depend on Britain. Northern Ireland will presumably have its own Food Control Department, collaborating with the British organisation.

While the report may have been in Ireland’s best interest, it is doubtful if the De Valera government was consulted on the matter.

Besides the sections on rationing, the report had appended to it an annex. The rationale behind the annex was set forth in the initial portions of the report, which states that rationing ‘raised issues of storage, transport and distribution beyond our scope. But we hope that it does

23 FS 13, 5 Oct. 1936, CAB 16/157, PRO.
not seem inappropriate to append to our Report a note by the Chairman as to some of the other problems in regard to food supplies which have to be solved before rationing is attempted’.

The essential elements that Beveridge included were as follows:

1. Food Controller with full powers as from the first day of war.
2. A feeding policy, thought out in advance, for adequate total supply in the country at all stages of a possibly protracted war.
3. A control plan prepared in regard to each essential food—for taking over supply, regulating prices, and directing distribution.
4. A plan for an initial emergency resulting from air attacks.

As it turned out, historians have focused on the annex as much as they have on the rationing report itself, for Beveridge’s annex in many ways encompasses the main ingredients of food control during wartime. Three of his ‘elements’ were actually worked out before the war: plans in case of air attacks, the immediate naming of a Food Controller (in reality the Minister of Food), and a plan to control each essential food. With regard to essential foods, Beveridge mentioned which foods would probably be considered by stating what had happened to each in World War I. The list included wheat and other cereals, sugar, meats, dairy products, and potatoes. Of those foods eventually rationed, only tea and cooking oils were not on the list.

The fourth element—a feeding or food control policy—was not in place at war’s outset, and it is this omission that historians, such as W. Keith Hancock, Margaret Gowing, and Richard Hammond, have emphasized. In a sense, they are correct, for a well spelled-out, long-range policy was not articulated and approved until early August 1940. But in a sense, their criticism is overly harsh. If one looks at what Beveridge said, one finds his comments stressed the storage of reserve stocks, nutritional considerations, and making do with what was available. While important, these considerations do not constitute a comprehensive food policy. In addition, British officials were addressing almost all of the elements included in the August 1940 statement, except for nutritional concerns, before the war started whether articulated or not. In other words, a statement of policy would undoubtedly have been helpful, but in this instance it was not critical.

On 9 October 1936 Beveridge went before the CID’s Food Supply Sub-Committee to explain the report. He emphasized that it was ‘not possible to improve on the principles adopted in the last war’, that ‘a good deal had already been done by the Board of Trade [with regard to gathering data]’, and that ‘a full watertight scheme [for rationing] could be in operation two or three months after the order was given’. He also stated that food control, as separate from rationing, ‘would be a large and complicated business’. This last statement prompted the Sub-Committee to recommend that Inskip, in consultation with the President of the Board of Trade and the Minister of Agriculture, investigate the wider aspects of food control and to report back its findings to the Sub-Committee in due course. What happened was that Inskip and his successors never did report back on the matter, and administrators therefore dealt with them in a piecemeal, though relatively effective fashion.

Less complicated but more controversial than the Beveridge report was the work of the Sub-Committee on food reserves. Food reserves or food storage had long been a topic of discussion in various quarters, and at its initial 4 May meeting, the Food Supply in Time of War Sub-Committee identified it as one of the pressing questions that needed to be examined. But the Sub-Committee had put off setting up a special ad hoc group at that time. At its next meeting, however, on 20 July, the Sub-Committee zeroed in on food reserves, and Agriculture minister Elliot rounded out the discussion by saying that he hoped Sir Ernest Gowers, who was head of the Coal Mines Reorganisation Commission, would be amenable to chair the new committee. Gowers agreed, but it still took some months before the food reserves Sub-Committee formally began its work. Part of the reason was that during the last half of 1936 the cost for wheat on the world market was inordinately high, but was expected to fall later in anticipation of a reasonably good harvest in 1937 in the United States and Canada. Another reason was simply that food storage at this time did not seem particularly urgent. Nevertheless, given the prospective dislocation that would occur at the outbreak of war and the decrease in food imports for its duration (estimated at 25 per cent), the government realized a food reserve policy had to be worked out.

26 FS, 3rd Meeting, 9 Oct. 1936, CAB 156/156, PRO.
27 FS, 1st Meeting, 4 May 1936, CAB 156/156, PRO.
The five-person Sub-Committee, christened the Sub-Committee on Reserves of Cereals for Livestock, started meeting on 4 December 1936. Like the rationing committee, Gowers’s Sub-Committee worked diligently and with dispatch. It had a report ready by 25 January 1937, and it was presented and discussed by the CID’s Food Supply Sub-Committee on 12 February. Fortunately, Gowers’s committee construed its brief broadly and looked into all essential imported foods, not merely reserves for feeding livestock.

The Sub-Committee set forth four alternatives, all based primarily on financial considerations. Plan I, the least expensive, was to provide a ‘London reserve’ and was to cost just over £5 million. The cost was to justify the purchase of seven goods—wheat and flour, oil seeds, whale oil (for margarine), sugar, canned meat, milk and cheese—and was considered of greatest value ‘in the event of a short period of dislocation following heavy air attacks’. Plan II was to include the same goods as in Plan I, but it was to cost £22 million, since it was to apply to all of the United Kingdom and called for an additional supply of wheat. Plan III was the same as Plan II, but it was to cost £10 million more to purchase livestock feed and nearly £9 million to construct storage facilities. Plan IV was to give the country three more months of food reserves, but the Sub-Committee warned that the increase in animal feed alone would be ‘very expensive to house’. Since Gowers and his fellow committee members made no specific recommendation as to which plan to adopt—though they had ruled out cold storage as too expensive—they left the decision to Inskip’s Sub-Committee.

As one might expect, the Treasury, represented by Sir Richard Hopkins, dominated the discussion at the Food Supply Sub-Committee meeting. He pointed out that even though the Treasury was concerned about other expenses besides food reserves, he thought ‘that if a scheme could be propounded, of which the cost would be on the order of £15 million to £25 million spread over a period of years, it should be possible in view of the current level of budgetary expenditure, to meet the cost out of revenue’. On the other hand, should the committee opt for Plan III or IV, it would be necessary to increase taxes or borrow, which would require legislation. In Hopkins’s view borrowing would also have an adverse effect on government credit, since it was already

increasing its demands on Britain’s financial institutions for loans. Hopkins’s position pretty much settled the matter. Although Inskip had replied that he believed the ‘public backs a food storage policy’, the Food Supply Sub-Committee decided to recommend Plan II, the minimal programme for the nation, with the added proviso that a reserve for animal feed, which was not provided for in Plan II, also be considered.

The travail, however, was not over. Inskip tried in February and again in July to get the cabinet to take action, but it kept putting off a decision. In the meantime the public, through letters to the editor and other means, kept the issue alive. Finally, on 9 February 1938, the Commons devoted an entire session to the question of food supplies during wartime, and most of the debate focused on food storage. Although nothing happened immediately as a result, it became clear to the government, and especially to Inskip, that many MPs were upset and thought it requisite to get something done. On 6 April the government quietly undertook to buy reserves of wheat, sugar, and whale oil, quietly so as not to disturb the market. The government paid £7.5 million for this instalment. Later in 1938 and in 1939 it made additional purchases of wheat from Romania and the United States (the latter through British millers, but paid for by the government), and it was negotiating to buy other goods referred to in Plan II, including canned meat, butter, and cheese, at the time the war broke out. Yet, at this point the government had only arranged for the storage of 500,000 tons of wheat, 150,000 tons of raw sugar, and 240,000 tons of whale oil. Although this tonnage amounted to only a little more than what Britain imported of these products every month, the government, ‘taking into account stocks held by the trade’, figured it had a three-month reserve. While these reserves were adequate so long as food imports were still flowing in, they would obviously be used up rapidly should imports be cut off.

While the work of the Beveridge and Gowers Sub-Committees was relatively focused, not surprisingly, that of the Ministry of Agriculture was

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30 Hammond, Food, i. 18–24, and George Walworth, Feeding the Nation in Peace and War (London, 1940), 520.
32 335 HC Deb., 1937–8, col. 51, 26 Apr. 1938; and FS 54, ‘Reserves of Food and Raw Materials’, 11 Aug. 1939, CAB 16/158, PRO.
much more broadly based. Even so, as the decade progressed, their planning and activities became increasingly defence oriented, and in this respect two major concerns—domestic production and farm labour requirements—and the Agriculture Act of 1937 best capture the thrust of their work.

Home production, or more precisely increased home production, was the ministry’s most crucial concern. It had been a significant feature in World War I and a topic of discussion in the twenties and early thirties, as production declined. In the spring of 1935, as war clouds began to gather, the ministry responded by setting up a committee specifically to look into food production in case of war. By the time the CID Food Supply Sub-Committee first met on 4 May 1936, Minister Elliot was able to report to his fellow committee members that the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, or the MAF as he put it, had already done a good deal of spadework on the production question, on ways the government could increase it, and on the personnel necessary to farm and produce it.34

As the MAF—and the nation—were well aware, possible increases in production were tied in with potential shipping difficulties, which would limit the amount of food coming into Britain.35 Officials had to consider a number of factors. One was to decide which countries and which products and fertilizers would be affected. Certain foods, such as citrus fruits and some vegetables, obviously could not be grown in Britain, and so substitutes would have to be found. But in other instances, especially grain, the home supply could be increased to the point that it could to an extent offset the losses in imports. Other factors, including shipping space, ease of shipping, and port availability, also had to be taken into account. Based on the above considerations and on the assumption that food imports would decrease by 25 per cent, the ministry set forth in January 1937 what it expected could be accomplished during the first twelve months of war. Using the Great War as a yardstick, it estimated that 1,285,500 acres of grassland could be ploughed and planted in wheat, oats, barley, and potatoes, and that the increase would be primarily food for human consumption rather than for animal feed. This would mean a decrease in the amount of meat available, but the government accepted it as a necessary sacrifice

34 FS, 1st Meeting, 4 May 1936, CAB 16/156, PRO.
(and hence the expectation that meat would be one of the products first rationed). Still, the January report was the genesis of a full-fledged ‘ploughing up’ campaign, which included a grant to farmers for putting pasture under cultivation or adding temporary grassland, and it was ready for implementation by July 1938.36

The ministry had always been aware that whatever the final form, the ploughing up campaign would require an organization to administer it, for it was anticipated to be a major, ongoing effort.37 As early as May 1936 Henry L. French, the second secretary in the ministry, and others started working out the particulars. One of the elements they wanted were the War Agricultural Executive Committees, which had played such a prominent role in boosting production in World War I. The ‘War Ags’ were to act as the ministry’s agents in the field, and each one was to include farmers, farm workers, local officials, and other individuals, such as representatives of the Women’s Institutes. Suitable persons were to be approached as soon as possible and confidentially so as not to cause undue concern, although the government acknowledged that those named would undoubtedly become known and that such knowledge might actually have a positive effect in that it would demonstrate the government’s active concern. During 1937 the Minister of Agriculture sent letters to prospective chairmen. They read in part as follows:

I feel strongly that the pivotal position of chairman is one for which the selection should be made in time of peace, if only to ensure that the Committee may be brought into existence with the minimum of delay in the event of war. It is to invite you to accept the position of Chairman of the Committee for __________ that I am writing.38

The letter ended by stressing that strict confidentiality should be observed.

In all, there were eventually sixty-one War Executive Committees in England and Wales and forty-three in Scotland, though in Scotland its Department of Agriculture exercised greater control than did its counterpart in the rest of the nation.39 In Northern Ireland its

36 [HC Deb., 1937–8, col. 587, 7 July 1938.
38 W. S. Morrison, ‘Letter Sent to Proposed Chairmen of County Agricultural Executive Committees’, 28 Oct. 1937, AF 45/485, SRO.
Agriculture and Commerce ministries oversaw the entire region. In organizing the rural areas, Scotland and Northern Ireland were in on the planning from the beginning, the key liaison persons being Scotland’s departmental secretary, P. R. Laird, and Northern Ireland’s minister, G. Scott Robertson.

The War Ags were not expected to handle this difficult job alone, and so provision was made for a number of District Committees within each county. They came to number 476, and their activities included not only stimulating production, but also such diverse matters as providing labour, machinery, pest control, and land management. Like the War Ags, the smaller District Committees became important elements in ensuring governmental oversight in the countryside.

Overseeing the preparations at the national level was the Minister of Agriculture, William Shepherd Morrison (1893–1961). Morrison had taken over from his fellow Scot, Walter Elliot, in November 1936, because the latter had become too outspoken an advocate for farmers at the expense of manufacturing interests. While Elliot remained in the cabinet as the Scottish secretary and continued to serve on a number of defence-related food Sub-Committees, the equally able Morrison became the primary spokesman for the farming community.

Known as ‘Shakes’ because of his love of Shakespeare, Morrison was born in 1893 in Torinkirk, Argyll. He was educated at George Wilson’s College and at Edinburgh and served in France as an artillery officer during World War I. After the war he became a lawyer and married Alison Swan, and they had four sons. In 1929 he was elected as a Conservative to parliament and represented a Cotswold constituency for the next thirty years. In the early 1930s he held a number of minor offices and was serving as financial secretary in the Treasury when elevated to the agriculture position.

In January 1939 he was replaced by the former president of the National Farmers’ Union, Colonel Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, not so much because Morrison was ineffective, but to head off mounting discontent in the countryside. Morrison was not left out of the picture, however. He became Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and he

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Propects (London, 1951), 34–7; FS, 1st Meeting, 4 May 1936, CAB 16/156, PRO; and A. T. A. Dobson, Ministry of Agriculture, to Dr G. Scott Robertson, Ministry of Agriculture, Northern Ireland, 2 Feb. 1938, AF 16/18/6, PRONI.

40 Murray, Agriculture, 324–5.
soon took on the additional duty of heading the Food (Defence Plans) Department in the Board of Trade. When the war broke out, he became Minister of Food. Although a gifted orator and writer, his administrative skills were insufficient for such a demanding task, and Chamberlain decided to replace him with the business executive, Lord Woolton, in April 1940. Even so, Morrison remained a part of the government as Postmaster General between 1940 and 1943 and as Minister of Town and Country Planning, 1943–5.

After the Labour hiatus he became Speaker in the House of Commons in 1951 and served in that capacity for the next eight years. In 1959 he was created Viscount Dunrossil and named Governor General of Australia. Two years later he died at Canberra and was buried there at the Anglican Church of St John the Baptist. His obituary states that ‘great dignity and warm humanity were among his many qualities which he brought to his office’. Although much admired for his abilities as Speaker in the Commons, his most outstanding service has perhaps been overlooked, for his work in preparing the food and agricultural sectors for World War II was also first-rate.

Assisting Morrison in his capacity as an agricultural minister was J. D. B. Fergusson (later Sir Donald), who became permanent secretary in March 1936. At first farming interests were sceptical of Fergusson because of his long service in the Treasury—he had been there since 1919—but the Oxford-educated secretary provided sound advice to the ministers he served, had excellent relations with others in the government, and developed good rapport with the farm groups. A testament to his effectiveness is the fact that he remained permanent secretary for nine years until 1945. In addition, Fergusson, along with his counterpart in what became the Food ministry, Sir Henry French, worked well together, and they helped put food and agriculture on a sound footing before and also during the war itself.

Besides addressing the issue of increased home production, the government considered other measures which had been of concern to farmers for years but which could also apply to defence. In February 1937 Morrison formed an interdepartmental Land Fertility Committee with representatives from Agriculture, the Scottish Office, and the Treasury to make proposals on both war preparations and ‘increasing the productivity of our own soil’. In April the cabinet accepted the

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42 The Times, 20 Mar. 1936, 14.
43 FS 29, ‘Note by MAF’, 22 Mar. 1937, CAB 16/158, PRO; John F. Martin, The Development
committee’s recommendations. They included the following: (1) a subsidy to improve grasslands by reducing the price of lime and basic slag fertilizer; (2) a deficiency programme for barley and oats should the market price dip too low (there was already one for wheat); (3) an increase from 27 to 36 million hundredweight (1.4–1.8 million metric tons) in the amount of wheat subject to a guaranteed price; (4) the provision of further grants for land drainage; and (5) the amalgamation of local veterinary inspectors into a national service to step up the campaign against animal diseases, especially tuberculosis in dairy cows. These improvements became the Agriculture Act of July 1937. Though not a comprehensive plan that would help rural Britain in peace or war, the act did help alleviate some of the bruised feelings in the countryside and lessened the discontent at least for the time being.

Besides home production and the 1937 Act, the government also dealt with another element—labour requirements in agriculture in the event of war. The CID’s Manpower Sub-Committee had been pursuing the issue for some years, and it had always kept in mind that while the needs of the armed forces were paramount, crop and livestock production were essential and could not be forgotten. In December 1936 the Agriculture ministry, at the behest of the Manpower Sub-Committee, set forth what it considered ‘reasonable’ for the country to expect.44 The MAF’s definition of reasonable was that while the agricultural industry would undoubtedly contribute to the armed services—the draft age was to be between 18 and 41—its contribution would have to be minimal until substitutes could be found. The ministry recommended that if a farmer, farm worker, or specialist, such as a shepherd or stockman, were 21 years of age, or was otherwise essential, he was not to be called up, since his position was among those considered ‘reserved’. Once a substitute, primarily women or men unfit medically for service, was in place, the reserved individual could be inducted into the armed forces. In cases where it was unclear if an individual were truly essential, local officials, similar to the War Ags in World War I, would determine his suitability. In addition, it was presumed that a number of farm workers would automatically be called to the colours as Territorials or reserves, and that the first group of substitutes would be used to fill those gaps. Even so, after six months, the national service registry should be

44 NS 65, ‘Contribution of Agriculture in Man-Power to the Forces in Time of War’, 5 Dec. 1936, CAB 57/3, PRO.
functioning so that the overall situation could be appraised more precisely. Also by that time the ministry thought that trained substitutes should begin to move into the agricultural workforce to replace the reserved but otherwise fit-for-service labourers.

Even though a number of assumptions in the Agriculture ministry’s memorandum were open to question, the ministry adamantly defended its position. In its view, ‘if our programme of wartime production is to be carried out’, there should be no loss of labour until replacements were provided and cases on individual farms could be handled at the local level. The Manpower Sub-Committee agreed in part, for its schedule of reserved occupations listed farm workers (including specialists), foresters, large garden growers, land agents, and poultrymen as essential, but in keeping with other industries, the age was raised the 25.45 (Late in 1938, the age was lowered to 21, thus reverting to the ministry’s original position.)

Despite governmental support, the lessening of tensions from the Depression and the beginnings of preparations for a wartime agriculture, many farmers were still unhappy, and in some instances, downright distraught. From their standpoint, the problem was that the government refused to listen to them. In the Commons, for example, on 24 February 1937, R. de la Bère, MP asked Mr Ramsbotham, the Minister of Pensions and government spokesperson: ‘Is the honourable Member aware of the widespread discontent among the whole of the agricultural community?’46 Ramsbotham’s reply was, ‘I have heard nothing of the sort.’ On 27 May Morrison told parliament that while the government was willing to sponsor some improvements—they became the 1937 Agriculture Act—there was a limit. He then set out the government’s position. He pointed out,

In the opinion of the Government, to put agriculture on a wartime footing with all of the regulations, the regimentation of the farming community, and the heavy costs that it would unavoidably involve, could not be practicable at the present time; nor in their opinion is the situation such as to require the adoption of this course in time of peace. The Government are equally satisfied that considerations of national defence would not justify a policy in peace time of stimulating agricultural production to such a pitch that the country would be faced with an artificial situation which would, sooner or later, have to be liquidated if the emergency did not arise. Such a policy would be costly to build up and costly to close down . . .47

In other words, in mid-1937, Treasury thinking remained the order of the day.

The irony in all of this is that the government actually was listening. In fact, it formed a Committee on Agricultural Policy in July 1937. It was a blue-ribbon committee, and it included not only Morrison and Elliot, but also Oliver Stanley, the President of the Board of Trade, and Sir John Simon, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, among its members. In the chair was the new prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, who as a result of his work in previous governments, was well versed in agricultural affairs.

Nevertheless, from the time the committee started meeting on the 13th, it became clear that the members were not particularly sympathetic to the farmers’ plight. Reflecting his earlier speech in May, Morrison, for instance, indicated ‘he was not in favour of stimulating arable production beyond what was necessary to secure a balanced agricultural industry’. Simon went further. In his opinion, ‘the danger was no longer that agriculture might suffer injustice—it was rather that injustice might be meted out to industry for the benefit of agriculture. Agriculture was no longer a “Cinderella”, but industry ought not to be regarded as an “ugly sister”’. Chamberlain agreed. Referring to the bill before parliament, which became the 1937 Agriculture Act, the Prime Minister noted that it ‘was more than a measure of defence preparations. It was intended to assist in reducing agricultural costs and also in educating the farmer in the best use of his land’. He then added, but within a broader context, that if a measure were passed that was designed to assist agriculture, but which unintentionally harmed industry, it ‘would be a more serious thing for the country than a measure designed to help industry which unintentionally damaged agriculture’. This ‘industry over agriculture’ theme Chamberlain would repeat later on several occasions. In the midst of the discussion, Lord Privy Seal De la Warr had commented on the need for a long-term policy for agriculture, which was the committee’s charge, but he was ignored.

The next time the committee met was two weeks later, on 27 July. The Agriculture Act had been passed, but rather than discuss a new long-term policy, the committee was pleased instead to note that its current policy of assuring ‘maximum supplies to the consumer consistent

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48 AP(37), 1st Meeting, 13 July 1937, MAF 27/632, PRO.
49 CP 195(37), 2nd Meeting, 27 July 1937, CAB 27/632, PRO.
with a reasonable remuneration for the producer’—what the government termed ‘balanced agriculture’—was being fulfilled. The committee then went into individual products. It considered the policies for meat, cereals, sugar beets, potatoes, hops, and horticultural goods to be ‘working all right’. Those for dairy products, including milk and eggs, and for bacon needed to be modified, but otherwise things were going well. A long-term policy that went into defence preparations, however, was not discussed.

But one year later, in the face of the mounting international threat, the government's position toward agriculture was beginning to change.50 To be sure, its policy still emphasized prosperity for the farmer, but as Morrison stated to the Commons, if war should break out, ‘I hope that the expansion of our agriculture will be of a permanent character’, not merely a wartime measure. While the end goal of a sense of well-being in the countryside remained the same, at least from Morrison’s standpoint, the means for getting there now had to take into account an additional idea. In his opinion the plans being made for agriculture during the war could be used as a basis for achieving prosperity in rural Britain after it. This type of thinking was truly long-term.

War preparations as they related to agriculture were only part of Britain’s food picture. The other part, and the more inclusive part, was food control. During 1936 to 1938 the government established the crucial department to deal with the matter, and despite criticisms from parliament and other interested parties, the Food (Defence Plans) Department, as it was called, moved ahead to ready the food sector for war should that eventuality come about. Setting up a specific department to deal with the matter had been discussed in governmental circles for a number of years. Hankey had brought it up as a pressing concern in the Food Supply Sub-Committee meeting in May 1936, and, amidst parliamentary prodding, its existence was made public through The Times on 30 November.51

The news article was relatively terse. It said that on the 28th, Board of Trade President Runciman had announced the formation of a new department to be known as the Food (Defence Plans) Department.

50 338 HC Deb., 1937–8, col. 1464, 13 July 1938.
51 FS, 1st Meeting, 4 May 1936, CAB 16/156, PRO; 317 HC Deb., 1936–7, cols. 868–9, 11 Nov. 1936; and [F(DP)D], ‘Extract from “The Times”—30th November 1936’, MAF 72/533, PRO.
Though a subdivision of the Board of Trade, it was to work in cooperation with—that is, take directives from—the CID’s Food Supply in Time of War Sub-Committee. Its charge was ‘to continue and to complete the formulation of plans for the supply, control, and distribution of food and feeding stuffs for defence purposes’. The first Director was to be Mr H. L. French, the second secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture. The article then stated, as had been stated elsewhere numerous times, that the new department ‘would not be directly concerned with home production, the responsibility for which is a matter for the Agricultural Department’. The rest of the article dealt mainly with Prime Minister Baldwin’s recent pronouncements on protecting the food supply and gave additional biographical data on French.

The official announcement was also short, but it pointed out that Food (Defence Plans) was to consult as required with numerous other governmental entities. These included the armed services, the Air Raid Precaution Department, the Home Office, the Ministry of Health, the three agricultural departments (thus taking into account Scotland and Northern Ireland), other sub-departments of the Board of Trade, and, of course, the Treasury. The memorandum further stated that a Ministry of Food, which had often been mentioned before, would be set up at the onset of war, and presumably Food (Defence Plans) would become the Food ministry, although this was not stated explicitly in the announcement.

At the same time the new department was being announced, the CID’s Food Supply Sub-Committee was examining how the defence establishment proposed to protect the food supply. The committee thought that most matters—from the security of import trade at sea to providing safe storage for food at home—were being dealt with. Members of the committee were somewhat concerned, however, about naval and air disruptions at sea and especially air attacks on the British Isles, although Inskip, based on naval assurances, thought that interruptions, such as the submarine menace, would be possible only ‘for a short period before it was mastered’. No matter how misplaced his confidence, the Food Supply Sub-Committee meetings and reports amply demonstrate the close linkage between defence and concerns about food.

52 FS 17, ‘Establishment of the Food (Defence Plans) Department of the Board of Trade’, 3 Dec. 1936, CAB 16/157, PRO.
The Food (Defence Plans) director, Henry French (soon Sir Henry), had been involved in creating the new department from the start. In a letter to Sir Horace Hamilton, the permanent secretary to the Board of Trade, on 18 November, French had even suggested ‘christening the new organization, “Food (Defence Plans) Department”’. In his opinion, this would ‘avoid giving the impression that the new show has anything to do with peacetime agricultural policy, or food and nutrition policy’. He also proposed that the head be called ‘the Secretary’, rather than ‘the Director’, because ‘the preparations of plans is certainly not directing’, or ‘the Chairman of a Committee’, because, in his opinion, ‘a committee should advise, not control the staff’. Director French obviously carried the day with his proposed name for the department, but not for his suggestion as to what the head should be titled.

Of all the individuals associated with preparing the country for war in the areas of food and agriculture—and during the war as well—none was more influential than Sir Henry French (1883–1966). He was born at Southsea, educated at King’s College, London, and appointed to the Board of Agriculture in 1901. He served on the board and in the agriculture ministry for the next 35 years. Among his positions, he was a secretary to Lord Milner’s Committee and to Lord Selborne’s Committee during World War I, and he held a number of secretarial posts in the ministry, including general secretary of the Food Production Department, during the 1920s. Between 1930 and 1934 he was the British representative on the Rearmament Committee of the International Institute of Agriculture in Rome. Earlier in the century he had married Clare Grimes, and they had one daughter. He was married a second time to Violet Huntley in 1929.

By the time he had become second secretary in the ministry in 1934 he was an acknowledged expert on questions related to farm imports. His extensive experience in agricultural affairs held him in good stead when he became Director of the Food (Defence Plans) Department, for governmental relations with the agricultural community were always delicate and required a skilled hand. In 1938 he was knighted. When the war began he was named permanent secretary in the Ministry of Food and performed yeoman service in that position throughout the conflict. After the war he left the civil service and then became

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54 French to Sir Horace Hamilton, Board of Trade, 18 Nov. 1936, MAF 53/132, PRO.
55 *The Times*, 30 Nov. 1936, 12, and 4 Apr. 1966, 16.
Director-General of the British Film Producers’ Association for eleven years, retiring in 1958. He died in 1966 at the age of 83.

French was not quite the stereotypical faceless administrator, for he spoke in public and to the press on a number of occasions, especially during his tenure as Director of the Food (Defence Plans) Department. But he was stereotypical in that he served the food ministers with whom he worked—Morrison, Lord Woolton, and Col. J. J. Llewellin—loyally and well. While not perfect—he did not grasp at first the importance of nutrition in preparing the food sector of war—he was, none the less, an outstanding civil servant, and Britain was fortunate to have a person of Sir Henry French’s calibre during this crucial period.

Almost immediately after French became director at the end of November 1936 he was forced to use his diplomatic skill, and his familiarity with agricultural interests, to fend off criticism. In early December he had read the National Farmers’ Union News Sheet, and while it had spoken of his appointment ‘in flattering terms’, it had also expressed uneasiness about what a Food (Defence Plans) Department would mean to home production.56 French immediately invited the NFU president, Major Dorman-Smith, and the secretary, Cleveland Fyfe, to meet him, and in their discussion he tried to allay their fears that the new department would encroach on agricultural matters, such as home production. He assured them that domestic production would remain under the purview of the Agriculture ministry. French indicated that his assurances to the two leaders ‘seemed to clear the air enormously’.

Nevertheless, criticisms of the Food (Defence Plans) Department continued to surface during 1937–8 and during the war itself. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, they were prevalent among several of the agricultural lobby groups, who never quite trusted French’s department, and even some trade associations and business firms at times felt the department was high-handed in dealing with their concerns. Members of parliament were not opposed, of course, to rendering criticisms either. On 22 February 1937 a Scottish MP, G. M. Garro-Jones, accused the government of not informing the Commons about what Food (Defence Plans) was doing, and E. Shinwell, MP for Seaham, asked about the problem of food supplies from abroad.57 Dr Leslie Burgin, the Board of Trade’s parliamentary secretary, answered evasively

56 [F(DP;D], Minute Sheet, 4 Dec. 1936, MAF 53/132, PRO.
by reiterating the duties of the department and went on to say that any
disclosure of plans would be premature. On the 24th Garro-Jones gave
his retort:

Surely it is amazing that, at this hour of the day, we should be told that the
Food (Defence Plans) Committee is to investigate problems of the food supply
of the nation in time of war. Has not that been done by the Committee of
Imperial Defence for the last ten years? If not, what has the Committee of
Imperial Defence been doing with regard to the organisation of food supplies
in time of war? This was one of the most vital questions with which the
Committee of Imperial Defence had to deal, and it seems to me to be entirely
wrong to say—58

As this point Garro-Jones was cut off by the Speaker.

Other examples of parliamentary displeasure abound.59 On 23 June
1937 Mr de la Bère, one of the government’s most persistent critics,
asked Inskip if plans for ‘the safeguarding of food supplies in the event
of an emergency’ had been finalized? Inskip’s reply was that even
though a good deal of progress had been made, no plans could be final,
since they ‘must remain subject to constant review to meet changes in
circumstances’. On 3 November Sir Arthur Salter inquired of Inskip
about the still unresolved food storage policy. Inskip answered that
while he was well aware of the issue’s importance, we still have to
remember that ‘when we are spending enormous sums to make the
Defence of the country such as to secure our safety, we have to consider
the whole cost of every scheme in the general plan of Defence as a whole’. On 2 February 1938, after a government spokesperson explained that a
food organization had now been set up throughout the country, de la
Bère’s response was, ‘Can the right honourable Gentleman give us an
assurance that there will be food to distribute, as we cannot eat bombs?’

On the 9th the members discussed at length a motion to allocate
funds for food storage in time of war.60 Although the motion was de-
feated, the debate ranged beyond the immediate issue and went into
the government’s food policy as a whole. Mr Parker began a string of
biting criticisms, stating that

In the last two years, there had been 49 questions put down in this House to the
Minister for the Coordination of Defence [Inskip] trying to find out what the

59 325 HC Deb., 1936–7, col. 1196, 23 June 1937; 328 HC Deb., 1937–8, col. 916, 3 Nov.
1937; 331 HC Deb., 1937–8, cols. 227–8, 2 Feb. 1938.
60 331 HC Deb., cols. 1086–143, 9 Feb. 1938.
[food] policy is. The Minister has noted suggestions that Members have made. He has not given any answer as to what the policy of the Government is, but he has very successfully stone-walled during the whole of that time.61

Salter was even more caustic, pointing out that

The House well remembers that, after a long period of procrastination, the Food (Defence Plans) Department was brought into being, apparently not so much because the Government wanted it, but as a defence against critics . . . Unhappily endowed and unhappily baptized, its prospects in life were poor, and these poor expectations have been abundantly realised.62

Topping off the assault on the government was the Liberal leader, Sir Archibald Sinclair, who said that according to The Times, ‘The Food Department plans . . . are merely plans for putting up [the] machinery’ for collecting, distributing, and buying food during wartime, but what he would like to know is if ‘we shall have a sufficient supply of food to distribute to the people?’ In his view, ‘Inskip will prove to be the old Mother Hubbard of the Government—the cupboard will be bare’.

In the meantime French and his colleagues, many of whom had served in the Civil Emergency Food Organisation, took the criticisms in their stride and forged ahead. As he wrote to Lord Astor, ‘The fact that the Government has created the Food (Defence Plans) Department may be taken, in itself, as evidence that the importance of the food problem in time of war is appreciated and that no stone is to be left unturned to cope with it’.63

Fortunately, the department has left four progress reports, which though written for the CID’s Food Supply Sub-Committee, are an immense help in figuring out the almost bewildering list of issues with which the Food (Defence Plans) Department dealt in 1937–8.64 The department addressed ten major issues, a number of which merely need to be updated, since we have examined them before. But others, such as the commodity schemes, armed forces requirements, and overseas trade, require a more extended discussion. The four reports, along with governmental memoranda and communications, render a fairly complete picture of what Food (Defence Plans) was doing.

61 331 HC Deb., col. 1087.  
62 Ibid., col. 1115.  
63 French to Lord Astor, 21 Dec. 1936, Univ. of Reading Library (URL), MS 1066/1/698.  
First of all, the department was concerned about its legality in time of war. The government had already drawn up draft legislation, but the problem now was to make sure the new food ministry, when constituted, conformed to the general legislation for establishing new entities. Until that happened the peacetime institutions were to act in an executive capacity. The Board of Trade, for instance, which contained the nucleus of the ministries of Shipping and Supply as well as of the Ministry of Food, was to exercise control on food matters through its (Defence Plans) department until the Food ministry became legal. The object was to ensure continuity as Britain moved to a wartime footing.

Second was the organization for food control. This aspect had also been addressed earlier, and Food (Defence Plans) accepted the World War I framework of a three-tiered organization: headquarters, division, and local. At headquarters, at least during peacetime, there were two divisions. Although their functions changed to an extent over time, the one under T. St Quinton Hill was generally to look after organizational matters, retail distribution, and rationing. The other division under E. M. H. Lloyd was to deal with individual commodities, including bulk supplies and wholesale price regulations at home and abroad. The number of persons on the headquarters staff continued to rise during the period, from 60 in December 1936 to 106 in September 1938, but that rise was almost minuscule when compared with the tenfold increase after the war began.

At the divisional level executive officers and their assistants in the civil emergency organization had already been contacted in March 1936 and told they might also be called upon should war break out. The divisions were similar geographically to those used in World War I, except that the boundaries were changed to an extent because of changes in population. As it evolved, there were, in addition to three entities for London and the Home Counties surrounding it, sixteen divisions—eight for England, two for Wales, five for Scotland, and one for Northern Ireland, which was to be centrally run from Belfast. Each division had its offices in the logical main city of the region—Liverpool for Northwest England, Birmingham for the Midlands, Glasgow for Western Scotland, etc.

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65 Food (Defence Plans) Department, ‘New Ministers and Secretaries Bill’, July 1938, MAF 72/566, PRO.
67 FS 23, 8 Jan. 1937, CAB 16/157, PRO.
The divisions were to serve as conduits to the local areas. By 14 June 1938 Food (Defence Plans) personnel had nominated a person, usually a town clerk or other authority, in 1,397 of the 1,527 areas. They were to receive instructions for setting up food control committees should that prove necessary. After considerable discussion the department had determined that each committee was to consist of fifteen members—five traders (a crop official, private butcher, private grocer, and two other retailers) and ten persons from the general public. Its duties were to be extensive—administering the local distribution and rationing schemes, licensing retailers who were to receive rationed goods, issuing rationing documents to consumers, instituting procedures for violators, and reporting back to headquarters ‘local opinion in regard to food questions’. The Food Control committees, like the District committees in agriculture, turned out to be vital elements in ensuring effective control over the nation’s food supply in wartime.

The third issue covered in the reports was air raid precautions. There was already a department in the Home Office responsible for drawing up the necessary plans, but the precautions had a food component in that air raids could well result in the destruction of food stocks and require emergency feeding. They might also result in evacuations from the major cities, especially London—hence the necessity of having food available for evacuees. By mid-1938 measures were being worked out to disperse or distribute certain foods, such as meat, grains, and tea in case of bombing attacks. Although additional adjustments had to be made, the adopted schemes functioned well when tested to a limited extent during the September crisis.

Closely tied to dislocations brought on by air attacks was the fourth issue, transportation. During this period, the main concern was to overcome distribution problems from the eastern cities and ports. By June 1938 Food (Defence Plans) thought it had the matter in hand. Plans had been developed to pool transport vehicles so that food would still be distributed even if roads or railways had been blocked, and transport was also to be made available to move goods in case shipping had to be diverted to the western ports.

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70 FS 43, 14 June 1938, CAB 16/158, PRO.
We have already addressed the fifth and sixth issues—storage and rationing. Since they were subject to additional developments, however, each requires an additional comment.\textsuperscript{71} It will be recalled that the government had finally started buying reserve stocks in April 1938, but while finding dry storage facilities posed no problem, cold storage did. At mid-year the government had sent out a questionnaire to some 500 cold storage operators ‘to ascertain the amount, location and efficiency of available cold storage accommodation’, which signified, in effect, that Food (Defence Plans) was still looking into the problem. The department was doing better with the details of rationing. It had determined that, besides meat, the ration book should have specific pages for bacon, butter and margarine, cooking fats, and sugar plus three blank pages for other products if necessary. Yet its statement ‘that 50 million ration books and other essential documents . . . should be printed in peacetime’ meant that some important details remained to be worked out.

The seventh issue was commodity control. Given the differences in producing and marketing the array of basic foods, the department decided early on to have a plan for each essential commodity.\textsuperscript{72} It further decided that each product was to pass through six stages before a scheme was adopted. They were as follows: decide which commodities required plans and then draw up preliminary drafts; show drafts to selected individuals for each commodity, including trade advisers and representatives from marketing boards and commissions; use their advice to draft a comprehensive statement; explain the comprehensive draft ‘to leading representatives of the growers and traders’; revise, if necessary; and send to Food Supply in Time of War Sub-Committee for approval.

The notations of E. M. H. Lloyd, the Division II director, give us an idea of how the process worked.\textsuperscript{73} He had seen Sir Frances Boys and Sir Philip Proctor about the meat industries. The next time he was to meet with them he intended ‘to ask their advice as to the best means of approaching the various sections of the trade, individually and collectively’. He had also met with Mr Pease and Mr Fehr regarding oilseeds

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., and FS 42, ‘The Printing of Rationing Documents’, 23 June 1938, CAB 16/158, PRO.

\textsuperscript{72} FS 23, 8 Jan. 1937, CAB 16/157, PRO, and Food (Defence Plans) Department, ‘Procedures to be Followed in Dealing with Individual Commodities’, 23 Dec. 1936, MAF 72/576, PRO.

\textsuperscript{73} [F(DP)D], Minutes Sheet, 2 Feb. 1937, MAF 72/576, PRO.
and would be talking with them again. The same situation applied to Mr Barnes of the Sugar Commission. Lloyd had further seen individuals involved in cereal production. He had found Sir William Burton, the former chair of the Flour Mills Control Committee during the last war, ‘very helpful and disinterested (not being a flour miller himself)’, though Burton had said he realized he was too old to serve if war broke out again.

The obvious point in these discussions is that in developing the commodity schemes the department was relying heavily on outside experts, who were providing not only advice, but whose companies were also providing statistics and other data that the department was using as a basis for each plan. Although Food (Defence Plans) personnel already knew a number of the advisers, others were being suggested by the Cattle Food Trade Association, the Tea Buyers’ Association, and the like. The department then asked the advisers, along with representatives of the commissions (wheat, livestock, sugar) and marketing boards, to form ‘shadow organisations’, which would be called upon to help deal with the individual commodities in time of war. The response of the traders was gratifying. The only problem was with the commissions and marketing boards. The difficulty had arisen, not because of the business community, but because of a disagreement between Food (Defence Plans) as backed by the Board of Trade and the Agriculture ministry. Agriculture insisted that the commissions and boards should remain independent entities and not take instructions from the wartime Ministry of Food ‘or any other department’. Food (Defence Plans) argued that, as a result of its activities, the commissions and boards should be put under the Ministry of Food. The CID’s Food Supply Sub-Committee decided in favour of Food (Defence Plans), and thus the boards and commissions were to become part of the Food ministry should that prove necessary.

By mid-1938 the combination of Food (Defence Plans) initiatives and trade advice had led to control schemes for sugar, butcher’s meat, bacon, butter and cheese, vegetable oils and fats, tea, and cereals. The cereals category included feeding stuffs for livestock, which was also to be under the Food ministry; since animal feed during wartime would be particularly sensitive to import controls. In addition to the above

75 FS 43, 14 June 1938, CAB 16/158, PRO, and [Ministry of Agriculture], ‘Supply of Feedingstuffs in Time of War’, 27 July 1938, AG 16/18/6, PRONI.
schemes, departmental officials were in contact with the milk and potato marketing boards, even though the country was largely self-sufficient in these products. The essential foods that the department expected to address in the future were fish, eggs, fruits, and fresh vegetables.

The eighth issue of concern to Food (Defence Plans) was prices, profits, and wages. French and his associates were well aware of their importance, and the department intended to institute controls ‘immediately upon the outbreak of hostilities’. With regard to prices, it would take possession of products at their source. French believed further that prices on foreign goods could be kept down by centralized purchasing and by coordinating purchases ‘on behalf of allied and neutral countries to prevent competition’. With regard to profits, French thought they, too, could be kept in bounds, and despite ‘war conditions’, he saw no reason why the immediate impact should cause more than a 10 per cent rise in prices over pre-war levels. With regard to wages, he realized that Food (Defence Plans) could do little on its own, but he hoped that the government would secure cooperation from the trade unions, much like his department was securing the cooperation of food traders. Otherwise, if wages were not controlled, and he was vitally interested in the food industry, then the benefits derived from controlling prices and profits would be in jeopardy.

While French may have been pleased with what was happening in the food sector, the Treasury was more apprehensive about what was happening elsewhere. In a discussion with French, Sir Arthur Robinson of the Treasury indicated his concern that other departments were not going to impose financial controls immediately but only gradually on the outbreak of war. This lack of coordination of the entire economy would obviously have an adverse effect on food. As French commented: ‘Food control cannot be effective unless wages, prices and profits outside the food trade are also controlled’.

The ninth issue—food for the armed forces—had also concerned the government for years. During World War I, when each service had handled its own procurement, there had been constant friction. This

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76 [F(DP)D], Minute Sheet, 13 Nov. 1937, MAF 72/581, PRO; [F(DP)D], Minute Sheet, 27 May 1938, MAF 72/86, PRO; and [F(DP)D], Minute Sheet, 20 Sept. 1938, MAF 72/86, PRO.
77 [F(DP)D], 27 May 1938, MAF 72/86, PRO, and [(DP), Minute Sheet, 14 July 1938, MAF 72/86, PRO.
78 Hammond, Food, i. 47–8; FS 43, 14 June 1938, CAB 16/158, PRO; PSO(BT) 64, ‘Foodstuffs’, 5 Feb. 1938, CAB 60/67, PRO; and CID, 29th Meeting, 15 July 1937, CAB 2/6, PRO.
time, at least in the food area, the three services agreed to coordinate their purchases with the civilian side of food procurement. The problem was turned over to Food (Defence Plans) to work out the details. It set up, with the approval of the Principal Supply Officers Committee, an interdepartmental Committee on Services Food Supplies in Time of War. In June 1938 Food (Defence Plans) reported that ‘arrangements for meeting service requirements’ were progressing satisfactorily, and the requirements list included tinned goods as well as the usual meat, potatoes, beans, condensed milk, and oats and hay for the horses. The only two items with which the department expected to have difficulty providing were frozen meat and bacon.

Food (Defence Plans) further wanted to make sure that there was at least one month’s ration for army and air force units stationed abroad. The department turned to the Principal Supply Officers Committee, whose response was that it had no option but to assume that the Royal Navy would keep the sea lanes open and thus ensure that the overseas contingents would be supplied. What the committee was saying was that except for unpredictable enemy aggression—admittedly a big exception—the food problem for the three services was well in hand. (Tri-service coordination in the food area was not replicated in the procurement of industrial goods, however. Even the establishment of a Ministry of Supply just before the war did not solve the issue, for the new ministry handled procurement only for the army, and not for the navy or air force.)

The tenth and final issue that Food (Defence Plans) was to deal with was overseas trade, though trade encompassed, of course, much more than food, and was of concern to numerous other departments as well as private firms. But the important point for us is that while the government always considered food and agriculture subordinate to industry, Great Britain bought more food products on the world market than any other country.79 Despite governmental measures in the 1930s, home production had increased very little, and the volume of food imports remained much the same as before. At 32 per cent, it was still Britain’s most significant import trade sector, followed by industrial raw materials at 22 per cent, and by finished manufactures and petroleum at 7 per cent and 5 per cent respectively. As in the past, the nation

continued to import the bulk of its wheat and flour, oils and fats, sugar, bacon and ham, butter and cheese, citrus and dried fruit, and half of its meat from abroad.

As one might expect, the overseas sources for these products spanned the globe. For wheat, Canada was the main supplier at 39 per cent of the total imports, but Australia provided 24 per cent and Argentina 15 per cent. But for animal feed, which, besides wheat, included corn, barley, and oil cakes, Argentina provided the biggest share at 57 per cent. In terms of meat, including bacon and ham, Argentina provided 31 per cent, Australia and New Zealand also 31 per cent, and Denmark 12 per cent. Of the other major imports, the Netherlands was the most important source of whale oil (47 per cent), Cuba and the Dominican Republic of sugar (37 per cent), and the continental countries of dairy products (46 per cent) and of fruits and vegetables (including tinned and preserved) (41 per cent). Another major trading partner, the United States, did not supply more than 10 per cent of any of these products except for fruits and vegetables (12 per cent), but it provided lesser amounts of other foods and was a major source of non-food products.

Food (Defence Plans) had to base its thinking not only on the source, but also on which country could provide what Britain needed in time of war.80 Some of its needs could be provided by stimulating production inside the British Isles—hence a £150,000 grant to Northern Ireland for flax—and the government also bought and stockpiled certain foods and fertilizers from abroad. But alternate sources would probably have to be utilized for other products, especially those from the Continent, should war break out. Another part of the problem was that it was still peacetime, and the government hesitated to intervene in normal trade practices. After Germany’s Anschluss with Austria in March 1938, however, the government realized the situation had changed dramatically, and that non-interference in normal trade no longer applied.

This change of policy assisted Food (Defence Plans) in its planning, though the department was moving in that direction in any event. But another difficulty for Britain was that throughout the 1930s its trade agreements had been worked out primarily on a bilateral basis.81 This resulted in a delicate balancing act, in which a food agreement with

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one country had to be framed so as not to unbalance agreements with other countries. Moreover, the farmers’ deteriorating condition at home had prompted the government to pass a number of measures to help them out. Even so, the government still did not want to alienate its trading partners. Two of the methods it devised—import quotas, or restrictions on individual goods, and levy subsidies, a tax on the exports of foreign governments or traders into Britain—did not work out, because, as might be anticipated, the overseas traders did not like them. As a consequence, in spite of the improving economy, the government continued to provide direct subsidies to its farmers. This practice the Treasury did not like, but the government had little choice unless it wanted to risk a revolt in the countryside.

Perhaps surprisingly, the always tortuous negotiations between Britain and overseas governments on trade matters were eased to an extent by the international threat. The reason was that each trading partner had goods and materials the other wanted, and they did not want war—any war—to interrupt their long-established commercial relations. This commonality of interest was especially evident with the Dominions and the Empire. Although none of the participants had been completely satisfied with the Ottawa accords of 1932, the British government was still confident that the Dominions shared its concerns, and that they might even be willing to forgo the ‘principle’ of duty-free entry and thereby contribute to the defence build-up.82 While this thinking was too extreme to be conveyed to the Dominions, by early 1937 Britain had decided to share with them and also to inform the Empire what they might expect in the event of war. In the food area, the government anticipated taking over complete control of pertinent imported foods from the Dominions, though regular traders and brokers might be called upon to act as agents for the government. Such a move would require the Dominions to control their own food exports, especially to enemy countries. To compensate for food surpluses that might arise because of altered trade patterns, the British were prepared to buy all of the Dominions’ exportable surpluses, as they had done toward the end of World War I, in the form of bulk contracts. Food (Defence Plans) thought that these measures would serve not only British interests, but those of the Dominions as well.

To see what the Dominions thought, the government needed to talk
with them, and an Imperial Conference, to be held in conjunction with the coronation of George VI, provided the opportunity. At a series of meetings between 31 May and 3 June 1937 British food officials—French was heavily involved—discussed trade issues with representatives from the Dominions and India, and persons from the Empire were also present as observers. Once the delegates ascertained which commodities were especially pertinent—wheat from Canada, Australia, and India, corn from South Africa, tea from India, etc.—discussions revolved around Britain’s proposed measures. The Dominions’ representatives were in agreement that at the outbreak of war the British government would assume control of their food exports to the United Kingdom, and that contract and shipping arrangements be made with these considerations in mind. Dominion and Indian officials also readily agreed to the idea of bulk contracts as a way to deal with surpluses.

The issue of the Dominions and India controlling their own exports was a little stickier. Representatives from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India, and Southern Rhodesia thought that export control would not be difficult to implement (they already controlled some of their products). And a Burmese official also affirmed that his country would be glad to work with Britain, though he realized only small quantities of rice and beans were involved. But the Canadian representatives doubted if their government would institute food controls in wartime, although they were favourably inclined toward what Britain was attempting to do. What the Canadians did not say, but everyone knew, was that Canada’s special relationship with the United States—they had signed a trade pact in 1935—was always a complicating factor in arriving at an agreement with the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, British officials were pleased with the outcome of the meetings. To be sure, specific agreements still had to be worked out bilaterally, but the Dominions and Empire now knew of Britain’s food plans and in general agreed with them.

Using the discussions with the Dominions as a precedent, the Foreign Office authorized ‘technical discussions’ with representatives from Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Argentina, and Denmark.

83 Committee on Munitions and Food Supplies, ‘Imperial Conference 1937’, 3 June 1937, MAF 72/101, PRO, and Food (Defence Plans) Department, ‘Supply of Food in Time of War’, n.d., MAF 72/101, PRO.

84 FS, 7th Meeting, 16 July 1937, CAB 16/158, PRO; FS 43, 14 June 1938, CAB 16/158, PRO; and CID, 320th Meeting, 28 Apr. 1938, CAB 2/6, PRO.
Norway and Sweden were later added to the list. During the ensuing year, the Foreign Office and other designated officials met with the overseas governments ‘in the strictest secrecy’. Regarding food supplies, the discussions revolved around two points: ensuring the timely delivery of food from those countries into the United Kingdom, and preparing ‘plans which would be put into operation at the outbreak of war if the Governments concerned should so decide at that time’. At this juncture no plans were finalized, but Britain’s negotiations with Belgium and France progressed to the point that they agreed to the joint purchase of food products from abroad so as to avoid competitive bidding. In fact, Britain’s discussions with France ‘had made it clear that, so far as food questions were concerned, the French interests were identical to ours’. Britain hoped for similar results with the other foreign trading partners in future negotiations.

The Sub-Committee on Food Supply in Time of War took a different tack with two other trading partners, Germany and Italy.\(^{85}\) In these instances, Britain’s defence establishment wanted to know what the food policies of these two countries were and where they were obtaining food they could not produce at home. Food (Defence Plans) was to work in close contact with the Foreign Office and with the Industrial Intelligence Division of the Overseas Trade Department to produce systematic reports on the situation in both countries. Based on Foreign Office data gathered in Berlin and from other sources, Food (Defence Plans) in June 1938 noted that the department was now issuing semi-annual reports on the food situation in Germany and was preparing to issue similar reports on Italy. Although the department did not say what, if any, conclusions it had drawn, it did indicate it had studied Germany’s dependence on the import of fats. In other words, Britain was at least attempting to keep abreast of what its two most likely enemies on the Continent were doing in the food area.

Another of Britain’s trading partners—the United States—warrants a more extended treatment, in part because of what America was providing the United Kingdom with at the time, but in part because of what it could provide potentially in time of war. During the 1930s trade between the two countries was extensive, always exceeding £100 million annually.\(^{86}\) The most significant feature was not the total amount of

\(^{85}\) FS 34, 28 July 1937, CAB 16/158, PRO; FS 43, 14 June 1938, CAB 16/158, PRO; and FS 45, ‘Memorandum . . .’, 8 Dec. 1937, CAB 16/158, PRO.

\(^{86}\) Department of State, Division of Western European Affairs, File A/B, 641.11/3, ‘Trade of the United States with the British Empire’, 20 Feb. 1934, US National Archives and
trade, however, but the fact that US exports to Britain were two and a half to four times greater than British imports into the United States. The figures for 1935–7 were as follows:

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<th>Year</th>
<th>US to UK (£ million)</th>
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<td>1935</td>
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<td>1936</td>
<td>93.0</td>
<td>36.7</td>
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<td>1937</td>
<td>114.0</td>
<td>42.3</td>
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The resulting trade imbalance might lead one to conclude that Britain wanted an agreement with America to redress the balance of payments problem, but other practical factors and a matter of principle were equally important. At first, the British sought a trade pact with the US to assist their industry and agriculture and thus to help them overcome the Depression, but by late 1936 the primary motivation had become Britain’s security.

For the Americans the practical motive was to redress the problems caused by the 1932 Ottawa accords, which had led to a decrease in trade between the two countries, and also between the United States and the Dominions. This negative view of Ottawa became a constant irritant in British–US relations as they attempted to conclude a trade pact later in the decade, and it remained a source of friction even during the war itself.

But also for the United States, and for Cordell Hull, the Secretary of State in particular, trade agreements were a matter of principle.87 In his view removing trade barriers would revive international commerce, which in turn would help heal the world’s political ills. Even though all nations would benefit, an Anglo-American trade agreement formed the capstone in Hull’s thinking, for the joining together of the world’s two great democracies could, in his opinion, ‘lay the foundation for a more orderly, prosperous, and peaceful world’.

As early as September 1934 US State Department and British Embassy officials began looking into the possibility of a trade agreement. The negotiations were to drag on for the next four years.88 The problem was that whenever the United States pressed for an agreement the British were unreceptive, but when the British took the initiative, the

88 Ibid., 6–7 and 120–2.
Americans, for their part, seemed to show a definite lack of interest. The result was exasperation on both sides. In the end, in November 1938, they concluded a pact, but only because they considered an agreement, imperfect as it was, better than none at all.

During 1935 and 1936 the negotiations went through various ups and downs but never proceeded beyond the preliminary stage. In November 1936 both countries submitted lists of items each wanted to have considered, but neither side was particularly pleased with the other’s list. For the US it was a ‘must’ list, including numerous food products, but the British made it clear that the main reason they now wanted an agreement was ‘the constant fear of war’.

In 1937 the stalemated preliminaries continued, although both sides tried on occasion to get the negotiations off centre. On the British side, Board of Trade President Runciman travelled to Washington in January to lend his support for an agreement. He did not impress State Department officials with his understanding of the issues involved. But he did indicate that there were members in the British cabinet—especially Minister of Agriculture Elliot and his successor Morrison—who stood in the way of a pact, since they wanted even higher duties to help protect British agriculture. On the American side, in June, Francis B. Sayre, one of the US’s negotiators, met with President Franklin Roosevelt to outline the situation and to ask permission to give Britain a list of possible concessions. Roosevelt said go ahead, though the concessions fell short of what Britain wanted.

Still, both sides were talking to each other, and both had influential governmental leaders who strongly favoured an agreement. Besides Roosevelt, Hull was definitely in favour, and despite his lack of resolve on other issues, he followed the negotiations closely and intervened at key times to ensure a pact was signed. For Britain, Anthony Eden and

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91 File 611.4131/355, C. H. [Hall], ‘Memorandum of Conversation . . .’, 9 Aug. 1937, RG-59, Box 3157, NARA; File 611.4131/281, Norman Davis to Dept. of State, 29 Apr. 1937, RG-57, Box 3157, NARA; File 611.4131/313, Ambassador Bingham to Dept. of State, 15 June 1937, RG-59, Box 3157, NARA; and TAC(36), 11th Meeting, 12 Apr. 1937, CAB 27/619, PRO.
Neville Chamberlain were staunch backers of an accord. Although Eden resigned as Foreign Secretary in February 1938, and thus was not involved during the later negotiations, Chamberlain’s continuous support, first as Chancellor of the Exchequer, and then as Prime Minister, was an exceedingly important factor in bringing about an agreement.

Another complication, though normal during any negotiations, was that throughout the period the State Department was receiving input from domestic traders as to how an agreement would affect them. Those with concerns included a wide variety of interest groups—from the Yakima [Washington] Fruit Growers Association and the Calbear [California] Canneries Company to the [Flour] Millers’ National Federation—and departmental officials had to respond to each of their letters and to hear testimony from them at hearings in Washington. Although Britain’s Board of Trade was similarly involved with its trade groups, the process seemed better organized and less diffuse than in the United States.

The State Department was further harried by having to appear before Congressional committees. The hearings were especially painful when isolationist senators used their time to question the feasibility of the prospective agreement. Senator Arthur Vandenburg, who strongly favoured neutrality, for instance, asked the State Department’s Francis Sayre: ‘I was wondering if the current reports were true that Great Britain had practically notified us that except she would be assured of the continuity of trade in time of war she would not be interested in any agreement?’ Although Vandenburg’s inquiry was close to the mark, Sayre answered untruthfully: ‘No such notification has come to my attention, sir.’

Despite these problems, after the exchange of several more lists, on 18 November 1937, the British and Americans finally agreed to open formal negotiations. The next day, the United States announced that it would simultaneously be meeting with Canada to improve on their previous agreement, thereby underlining the close relationship on

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93 File 611.4131/245, ‘Excerpts from Mr. Sayre’s Testimony . . .’, n.d., RG-59, Box 3156, NARA.
94 Kottman, Reciprocity and the North Atlantic Triangle, 209, and File 611.4131/681, Harry C. Hawkins to Mr Sayre, 27 Dec. 1937, RG-59, Box 3159, NARA.
trade among the US, Britain, and the Dominions. In late December the prospect for success was further enhanced when Britain disclosed to the Americans that the Dominions had, except for a minor reservation to Canada, assented to any concessions the British might have to make to the United States to secure an agreement. The concessions were to be granted even though they might conflict with Britain’s preferences to the Dominions. In other words, for the common good, Britain’s earlier willingness to discuss with the Dominions its plans for dealing with them in trade matters during wartime had induced them to go along with whatever agreement the British were able to fashion with the United States.

Although the Dominions’ concession was important, the two countries still had to agree between themselves. This turned out to be no small task. Only in November 1938, eight months after formal talks had begun, was an agreement signed. Why such a long delay?

The main reason was that the specific points to be negotiated were complex. The list of products the US gave the British to consider on 8 January 1938 ran to forty-seven pages and numbered nearly 400 items. The British list was less extensive, but long enough to prompt the State Department to ask that Britain’s seventeen-person delegation, headed by Arnold Overton of the Board of Trade, delay their sailing to America for two weeks so that US officials could adequately go over the list before they met. The British concurred, and so the first formal conversations in Washington did not take place until 4 March.

A related problem was that since not all of the items listed could be discussed, certain products were emphasized in the negotiations. Food items loomed large, since the United States wanted to relieve the distress of its farmers, and Britain was, of course, a big food importer. But negotiators still had to learn the current duty on the major products, if any; the annual amount spent in dollars or pounds on each imported item; and the amount of food Britain imported from other countries. Moreover, Britain exported very little food to the United States; hence, trade-offs with the US would primarily be British manufactures, not food products.

An extreme case of the complexity involved was America’s export to

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95 File 611.4131/726, Dept. of State, ‘List of Products . . .’, 8 Jan. 1938, RG-59, Box 3159, NARA; File 611.4131/897A, Hull (FB Sayre) to American Embassy, 27 Jan. 1938, RG-59, Box 3160, NARA; File 611.4131/1010, British Embassy to Hull, 11 Feb. 1938, RG-59, Box 3160, NARA; and File 611.4131/1205, Hull (FB Sayre) to American Embassy, 7 Mar. 1938, RG-59, Box 3161, NARA.
Britain of canned fruit salad, or fruit cocktail, as it is sometimes called. Each ingredient—cubes of peaches and pears, white grapes, and a few maraschino cherries—had its own duty, and they were preserved in a sugary syrup. After an extended discussion it was decided that so long as no fruit constituted less than 8 or more than 50 per cent, by weight, of all the fruit in the mixture (excluding the syrup), the rate of duty would be 5s. 6d. (28p) per hundredweight (51 kg). If one of the fruits (meaning the expensive, marinated cherries) did not amount to 8 per cent of the total weight, presumably the canned good could not be shipped to Britain as fruit cocktail.

Additional lists, always with items added, continued to appear, but neither the British nor the Americans were willing to make sufficient concessions to secure an agreement. On 2 July Hull indicated that Britain’s offer in agricultural products and lumber ‘fell far short of our own minimum requirements’. On the 21st the British government’s Trade and Agriculture Committee recommended that the Cabinet grant the US’s request for free entry of maize and lard and that a formula be worked for tobacco. But it proposed that America’s requests for concessions on ham, wheat and flour, planed softwood, plywood, motor cars, electric motors, typewriters, and silk stockings be rejected. A flurry of activity to come to an accord in late July—before the Commons recessed until November—came to naught, and the Americans even began to worry that nothing would be signed before their Congressional elections in November.

Yet a number of issues outside the negotiations themselves pushed the two countries toward an accommodation. A sharp recession affected both nations in 1937, and a worsening trade balance between the two during the first half of 1938 signalled that a trade pact would assist especially Britain, but also the United States with respect to opening up trade. There were also political factors. Hull kept saying that an economic agreement would help promote peace, and while the British were more sceptical that an accord with America would truly ensure

96 File 611.4131/1763, ‘UK-USA Negotiations, Schedule I’, 29 Aug. 1938, RG-59, Box 3164, NARA.
97 File 611.4131/1625A, Hull to American Embassy, 2 July 1938, RG-59, Box 3163, NARA, and TAC[36], 16th Meeting, 21 July 1938, CAB 27/619, PRO.
98 File 711.41/399, 4 Mar. 1938, RG-59, Microfilm T-1252, Reel 1, NARA; File 611.4131/1318, Herschel Johnson, American Embassy, to Sec. of State, 7 Mar. 1938, RG-59, Box 3162, NARA; File 611.4131/1681, Hull to American Embassy, 25 July 1938, RG-59, Box 3164, NARA; and File 611.4131/1707, Ambassador Kennedy to Sec. of State, 30 July 1938, RG-59, Box 3164, NARA.
peace, they were well aware of its importance. In Britain’s view there was a further factor: a trade pact with the other great democracy would ‘enable the public of the United States to see that something more than economic cooperation is required’ to deal with the world’s tensions. The Americans might have thought that Britain’s reasoning—it was actually that of the Royal Institute of International Affairs—was a bit disingenuous, but US leaders were also convinced by now that the primary reason for concluding an agreement was political rather than economic.

Despite the difficulties, both countries’ negotiators continued the effort. In September Sir Ronald Lindsay, the British Ambassador, had a private conversation with US negotiator Sayre about the ‘trade agreement situation’. Lindsay began the forty-five-minute talk by reminding Sayre that whereas in America the final decision, subject to the approval of the cabinet and President, lay with the State Department, in Britain the final decision, subject to cabinet approval, lay with the Board of Trade, not the Foreign Office. He then went on to the heart of what he wanted to say. He said that he had been giving a good deal of thought to what he and Sayre had discussed earlier, and he had decided, as a means of breaking the impasse, ‘that the time had come to lift the negotiations out of the hands of experts’. He thought that ‘because of the crucial importance of an agreement from the viewpoint of the whole international situation’, it was necessary to conduct the negotiations ‘on the basis of high statesmanship rather than horse-trading’. He had therefore come to the conclusion ‘that he hoped the final stages of the negotiations might be carried out by him and myself [Sayre]’. Lindsay’s idea was that the ‘experts’, Overton and the others from the Board of Trade, would still be involved, but only to explain technical matters. Sayre replied that he was in agreement with Lindsay’s proposal, and once he had talked with Secretary Hull and President Roosevelt it might be possible to proceed along the lines Lindsay suggested.

From this point on the Ambassador became Britain’s chief negotiator. The talks were taking place during the Czech crisis, and the two sides at this point seemed to share a commonality of understanding. Hull told Lindsay on 28 September, for instance, that, whatever happens, ‘we [the United States] would have no purpose to displace British
trade by taking advantage due to the war and Great Britain’s participation in it’.100 Lindsay said he appreciated Hull’s remarks.

The war scare passed, but still the negotiations did not go well.101 On 6 October US officials handed the British a note that sought additional concessions. Two days later, Lindsay wondered if the United Kingdom met American requests on tobacco, lumber, and lard, would that be sufficient? Sayre answered in the negative. What Sayre was saying was that the British ought to give in on ham, maize, wheat, motor cars, electric motors, typewriters, and silk stockings as well. In other words, the US wanted concessions, or at least continuing guarantees (called binding) on virtually all the items of contention the previous July. Lindsay ended the meeting by stating that the Americans could expect a definitive reply on 22 October.

The British were in a quandary. They definitely wanted an agreement, but at what price? At this point, Lindsay was particularly upset.102 In a telegram to Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary, he gave vent to his frustration. ‘Their [the Americans’] delays and tergiversations have been intolerable, they can see no point of view but their own and their demands cause His Majesty’s Government loss of revenue and administrative difficulties out of all proportion to the benefits likely to accrue from American trade.’ He continued: ‘I myself have always advocated Trade Agreements less on economic than on political grounds. [The] political grounds today are as overwhelmingly strong as ever before.’ But he realized reluctantly the need to proceed to get at least some agreement.

On the 13th Britain’s Trade and Agriculture Committee went over the US’s latest demands.103 Oliver Stanley, the President of the Board of Trade, considered the demands, in effect, an ultimatum. In his view, except for the concessions on maize and lard, what the Americans wanted was ‘quite indefensible and unacceptable’. The Committee then went over the demands item by item and accepted free entry for maize and lard and no increase in the duty for tobacco, but rejected concessions on the other eight items.

By the time the two sides met on 25 October, however, the British

100 FRUS, 1938, ii. 55–6.
102 TAC (36), Lindsay to Halifax, 9 Oct. 1939, CAB 27/ 621, PRO.
103 TAC (36), 17th Meeting, 13 Oct. 1938, CAB 27/619, PRO.
had decided to make further concessions by accepting free entry for wheat, reducing the tariff on softwood lumber from 10 per cent to 5 per cent and raising the quota on hams that could enter the United Kingdom. But to the other changes the Americans wanted on the five non-food items, including motor cars, the British said they could not agree. Lindsay then told Hull that this was Britain’s ‘last word’. Hull answered that before responding State Department officials would look over Great Britain’s reply. But he also could not hold back from expressing his disappointment. He said ‘that although we entered into our negotiations with the British more cordially perhaps than in any other instance, we had experienced four times the difficulty in the negotiations than we had had in negotiating the other [previous] eighteen trade agreements’.

During the next week, however, Hull changed his mind. On 3 November he telegraphed his ambassador in London, Joseph Kennedy, who, despite his pro-German leanings, had been a real help to the Americans during the negotiations. ‘After careful consideration’, Hull wrote, ‘I have decided, with the President’s approval, to accept the pending British offer . . . and to proceed forthwith to the signature of a trade agreement.’ If we take Hull at his word, the reason he had decided to go ahead was that beyond this point Britain was unwilling to go ‘without protracted delay’, and that any further delay would at best be an unpleasant prospect.

On 17 November the Anglo-American trade agreement was signed. It was to come into effect on 1 January 1939. On that same day the United States also initialled an agreement with Canada, thus highlighting the triangularity of British, American, and Canadian interests. The US–British pact, as might be expected, was a bulky document covering more than 400 items. In terms of food, the list included forty-seven American exports into Britain, from wheat and maize to sausage casings and canned fruits. It made up about 17 per cent of

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105 File 611.4131/1855A, Hull to American Embassy, 3 Nov. 1938, RG-59, Box 3165, NARA.
Britain’s imports from the United States. The other approximately 83 per cent consisted of tobacco, oil, machinery, parts and tools, and manufactured goods. The 31 food-related British exports to the US covered an equally broad range of products, from molasses and poultry to cut flowers and curry powder. But all of them together were only a fraction of the total Britain imported from America.

One of the ironies surrounding the negotiations, perhaps most meaningful negotiations, is that while the negotiators had at times been distressed and at the end disappointed they had not achieved all they had hoped or wanted, the reaction outside the negotiating room was almost everywhere positive.107 Lord Halifax telegraphed Lindsay and asked him to congratulate the Secretary of State on the ‘success of the negotiations’. The British press, except for Lord Beaverbrook’s Express, praised the agreement as ‘valuable and fair’, and the French and Dominions’ newspapers also reacted favourably. America’s farmers were more sceptical, but an address by Lynn Edminster, a State Department official, to a farm group in Lincoln, Nebraska, was generally well received.108 Edminster’s message was that the agreement would help their ‘surplus problem’, and at the same time assist Britain’s manufacturers. Nor did the United States’ defence departments find much to criticize.109 They had been kept informed throughout the negotiations, and Harry Hawkins of the State Department indicated that even though it had not been possible to secure a favourable duty on hypodermic and surgical needles, the department had been able to get a reduction on cotton cloth, especially airplane cloth.

What then was actually accomplished?110 In the food sector Britain had made a number of concessions. It had agreed to remove entirely the duty on wheat and lard; reduce it on rice, pears, apples, and certain canned fruits and fruit juices; continue on the free list maize and pork products; and increase the quota on hams. The American

107 Viscount Halifax to Lindsay, 16 Nov. 1938, British Documents on Foreign Affairs, Series C, North America, 1919–1939, xvi. 172; File 611.4131/1891, Kennedy to Sec. of State, 18 Nov. 1938, RG-59, Box 3165a, NARA; File 611.4131/1896, Edwin Wilson, French Embassy, to Sec. of State, 19 Nov. 1938, RG-59, Box 3165a, NARA; and File 611.4131/2148, Thomas Wilson, Sydney, to Sec. of State, 5 Dec. 1938, RG-59, Box 3166, NARA.
109 File 611.4131/1798, Harry Hawkins to War and Navy Departments, 22 Nov. 1938, RG-59, Box 3165a, NARA.
110 Tracy, Governments and Agriculture, 156, and Kottman, Reciprocity and the North Atlantic Triangle, 266–7.
concessions, meagre by comparison, were primarily in textiles, metals, and metal manufactures.

In a more general sense, the agreement did not really help Britain’s farmers. Although the duties on apples, pears, and several other items had been reduced, they still were around 15 per cent. Moreover, the removal of the duty on wheat had a greater impact on American wheat growers than it did on Britain’s, who benefited more from governmental subsidies and guarantees than from the trade pact with the United States. As for America’s desire to undercut the Ottawa agreements, it accomplished this practical objective only to a limited degree, and imperial preferences remained intact. Regarding America’s, and Hull’s, wider objective of a more open economic system giving rise to greater political cooperation among the world’s nations, the impact of the trade agreement was limited, and might not in any event have accomplished Hull’s goal. What the accord did for Britain was to help ensure that if war broke out the United States would be on its side. To that extent, the extended bargaining—and frustrations—experienced by both sides in reaching the agreement were undoubtedly well worth the effort.

Two events that took place in the summer and early autumn of 1938 had a major impact on food, agriculture, and rearmament during the period. One of them—the September Czech crisis—is well known; the other—Prime Minister Chamberlain’s July speech at Kettering—less so. However, both of them were important, though for different reasons.

Chamberlain gave his Kettering speech at a government rally on 2 July. His talk was devoted primarily to agricultural concerns, and he did not take long to get to his main point: although it was theoretically possible, he said, for Britain’s farmers to produce all the food the nation needed, in his view, this would be the wrong approach. It would not only ruin trade with the Empire and foreign countries on whom Britain depended for food, but it would also destroy our export markets for manufactured goods abroad. Thus, ‘in the end the final sufferer would be the farmer himself’.

Chamberlain went on to assure his audience that the possibility of Great Britain being starved out in wartime was ‘entirely fallacious’, because the navy and merchant marine would keep the trade routes open. Nevertheless, two precautions were necessary—food reserves and a reduction in bulky foods aboard ships—and the government was dealing with both problems. In the case of reserves, they had already ‘been laid in’, and regarding more cargo space, the difficulty would be overcome by putting in place plans to increase domestic production. The Prime Minister then ended his talk by defending the government’s agricultural policy as ‘broad and comprehensive’. It would, in due course, he assured them, ‘bring relief to every section of the agricultural industry’.

The speech, well intended though it may have been, caused an uproar among the nation’s farmers. In their opinion, while the government had undertaken measures to relieve their plight, they had still not recovered completely, and in some instances, not at all. Now to be told that agriculture would again be sacrificed at the altar of British manufacturers was more than they could take. The responses in The Times were critical but not inflammatory. Sir Arthur Salter and A. P. McDougall of Banbury limited their criticism to pointing out that the goods being stored by the government were insufficient should any future war become a long one. But McDougall could not resist adding: ‘A defence policy based entirely on the production of guns, munitions, and aeroplanes, to the obvious neglect of food production or storage, is neither intelligent nor wise.’

Among the farming community, the response was less restrained. In a 12 July editorial in the Farmer & Stockbreeder, an agricultural weekly, the writer said Chamberlain’s speech ‘was received by farmers with a mixture of bewilderment and astonishment’. More specifically, the writer agreed with the Prime Minister that domestic agriculture could not be self-supporting, but it could produce more than it was doing at present, and the editorial further emphasized that the government needed to get started before rather than after a war started. In an article in the same issue the magazine reported that the Warwickshire Farmers’ Union was ‘dismayed’ and the Suffolk farmers ‘seriously alarmed’ by Chamberlain’s Kettering address.

On the political scene the Labour party saw the speech as an

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113 *The Times*, 9 July 1938, 13, and 5 Aug. 1938, 8.

114 *Farmer & Stockbreeder*, 12 July 1938, 1665.
opportunity to attract voters to its banner. Christopher Addison, the Labour spokesperson on agricultural affairs, felt that since Kettering the party had made steady inroads among farmers and farm workers, and that the four vans touring the rural areas with loudspeakers and flyers had been well worth the £2,500 expenditure. The Conservatives, on the other hand, had engaged in what has later been called ‘damage control’. Its Parliamentary Committee, through its members, had tried to reassure farmers that they and the Prime Minister realized problems remained in the countryside and that they sympathized with them. Minister of Agriculture Morrison became the chief defender of the government’s position. In the Commons and in a series of speeches across the country, Morrison indicated that Chamberlain had been misunderstood. At Kettering he was talking about the extreme view that it was necessary for the nation ‘to be self-supporting in food supplies’. What Chamberlain had meant, according to Morrison, was that the notion of self-sufficiency was extreme since ‘there was no prospect of this country being starved out because we had lost control of the sea’, and the nation will definitely not lose control of the sea. Morrison then added: ‘I had been closely associated with Mr. Chamberlain for a considerable period. I can say from my own experience that agriculture has few better friends in this country than Mr. Chamberlain.’ Whether the farming community accepted Morrison’s assurances is another matter.

The Czech crisis was, of course, a turning point not only for rural Britain but for the entire nation. Throughout September, but especially after Hitler’s sabre-rattling speech on the 12th until the evening of the 29th, when the German dictator, Italy’s Mussolini, Chamberlain, and the French premier, Edouard Daladier, signed the infamous Munich Pact, Britain and the Continent were in constant turmoil. That the crisis was settled did not mask the fact that the nation had truly been at the brink of war, and the government and its citizenry had reacted accordingly. All of the departments had pulled out their war books, which outlined the procedures to be followed. The area most directly affected was obviously the armed forces, and during the crisis

116 Giddings, Marketing Boards and Ministers, 181, and [F(DP)/D], ‘Clipping of Speech by Morrison’, 26 Oct. 1938, MAF 53/141, PRO; and Eastern Daily Press (EDP) (Norwich), 14 July 1938, 8.
the fleet was mobilized, reserves called out, and anti-aircraft defences set up. In the cities gas masks were handed out and trenches dug in the parks.

In the food sector the Ministry of Agriculture and the Food (Defence Plans) Department were most heavily involved, but their activities also affected other governmental bodies, such as the Air Raid Precautions Department and the Ministry of Transport.\textsuperscript{118} Organizationally, the Agriculture ministry alerted the chairmen of the county executive committees, and steps were taken to fill out the various committees. At the same time Food (Defence Plans) contacted its division officers, and they proceeded to regional offices in the major cities, but no control measures had been initiated. Nor were evacuation schemes put in force, though some voluntary migrations took place none the less. With the aid of private food traders, canned meat, milk, chocolates, and biscuits were delivered to storage places near train stations where evacuees would have been transported if the plans had been executed. In addition, food traders provided for the removal of goods from endangered ports, and steps were taken in conjunction with the Dominions to provide for bulk purchases if war broke out. Moreover, Food (Defence Plans) sent out a circular to the military services regarding plans for their provisioning, and agriculture officials went over their plans to increase domestic production and decided instead to modify them because the crisis had occurred in the autumn. Finally, on the 29th, to discourage panic buying or a dramatic rise in food prices, newspapers informed the public that ‘supplies of essential foodstuffs in Great Britain are adequate . . . for some time to come’. The next day the government announced that all was ready, if necessary, for food control.

Yet none of the measures taken went beyond what the government called the preparatory stage, the least disruptive of the three alert stages that would lead to war.\textsuperscript{119} The other two—the precautionary and war stages—were not declared, but could have been had the crisis escalated further. Only at the third or ‘war’ stage, however, would complete food control have come into effect.

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\item \textsuperscript{119} CID, K299, 10 Feb. 1939, CAB 15/24, PRO.
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Although the government had only issued a preparatory alert, the crisis had provided the departments with their first opportunity to test their procedures under realistic conditions, and, given the gravity of the situation, they had learned a great deal. In a report released on 28 October Food (Defence Plans) thought that, overall, things had gone well, but it still had to make improvements.\textsuperscript{120} In terms of organization the main problem was to be better prepared at all levels. The local organizations had not been mobilized, but were expected to perform well with a minimum of delay. At the divisional level, however, others besides the chief officer should be selected and briefed, and officials of the various commissions and marketing boards should be asked to work out in detail how they expected their staffs to function during time of war. Furthermore, the food traders had performed yeoman service during the crisis, and they should be brought more completely into the planning process. The most serious deficiency had been at headquarters, where 106 Food (Defence Plans) officials and staff workers had been expected to set in motion the entire food control system. Their numbers had to be raised substantially if a smooth transition from peace to wartime was to be realized.

Also, whereas the food organization would probably have functioned according to plan, the report said it was doubtful if every scheme for controlling the supply and distribution of every important commodity, such as wheat, sugar, tea, and the like, would have been put into operation without serious dislocations. The first step should be to work out the details—placing orders, price schedules, account forms, etc.—for each commodity to ensure that the movement from private to governmental control could be achieved with a minimum of disruption. Food (Defence Plans) thought this step could be accomplished, if it had additional staff, by the end of March 1939. But to impose controls immediately or even before the outbreak of hostilities so as to ensure that prices did not get out of hand posed a serious problem that the department thought could only be solved by utilizing employees from the private sector first and earmarking them for war duties. The department had been pleased, however, that throughout the crisis it had received ‘hardly a complaint of a rise in retail prices’, in part because food traders had provided, at their own expense, additional deliveries to retailers. But to expect a similar reaction from shopkeepers in the future was unlikely. Along these same lines, measures for imposing price

\textsuperscript{120} F(DP/D, 28 Oct. 1938, MAF 72/549, PRO.
controls on all major food items—they were fixed only for meat—needed to be worked out to protect consumers.

During the crisis the department reported that there had been some hoarding, especially of non-perishable goods. Although the reason was probably because the public expected rationing to be imposed, this possibility had not prevented cases where ‘retail shops had to close temporarily because their stocks were exhausted’. The solution was to have laws that would make it possible to prosecute offenders. The department further thought the time had come to encourage households to buy reserves of non-perishable items. While such a proposal would benefit only those with ‘spare money’ to spend, officials saw no reason not to give guidance as to what ought to be stored and for how long. Regarding rationing, the plan had been developed, but it was expected that the necessary documents could not be printed and ready for distribution until the next July. In the interim the Stationery Office said it could print up temporary forms, but officials admitted this stopgap arrangement, too, would be difficult to accomplish in less than three months.

Food (Defence Plans) was also concerned about the evacuations from the cities. Although a number of people had left voluntarily during the crisis, food officials were gratified how much traders had done on an ad hoc basis to make sure that emergency rations had been available at stations along the routes and at the reception areas. Even so, better coordination among all the departments would be necessary for large-scale evacuations.

While Food (Defence Plans) had talked with the Dominions and Empire about bulk purchases at the time of the crisis, the need now was to secure agreements with the foreign countries to ensure that trade with them continued on items of interest to both parties. Only with France did the department have ‘a definite line of action in the event of an outbreak’.

The Ministry of Agriculture had also in general been pleased with how things had gone.121 The plans for increasing production by 1,325,000 acres during the first year seemed reasonable, though, as pointed out, the crisis in September, rather than in the spring or summer, had meant that production goals had to be modified. Organizationally, as in World War I, the county committees looked like a good solution for ensuring effective oversight in the countryside. The ministry

121 MAF, 24 Oct. 1938, MAF 39/34, PRO.
acknowledged that the problem of sufficient farm labour posed difficulties. But the fact that practically all agricultural workers over 21 were reserved definitely helped in the near term. Over the long run substitutes had to be found from a number of sources, but forming a new Women’s Land Army would be a partial solution. Lady Gertrude Denman, the dynamic head of the Women’s Institutes, had agreed to lead the new organization. After the crisis, Lady Denman had pointed out to agriculture officials that finding accommodations for the workers would be hampered because of the evacuation plans.\textsuperscript{122} In the first place they would affect women in the villages who would have undertaken land work nearby, but now had their homes filled with evacuees, and in the second place, the large influx of refugees would make it difficult to find housing for women brought in from outside. H. J. Johns of the ministry assured her they would work on a solution to the problem.

The biggest problem the ministry foresaw, however, was the attitude of the farmers themselves. Although price controls on what they produced—and on what they bought—would be necessary, they still had to have sufficient financial incentives to go along with the government’s plans. If they did not realize a profit, no matter how loyal they might be to the country, their willing cooperation would be difficult to obtain over the long term.

The Czech crisis had therefore brought to a head in Britain the relationship between food and rearmament. It had allowed the government to test a number of procedures the departments had been working on during the last two years, and it had provided lessons that pointed up the need for improvements. The crisis also made clear that the time to prepare might well be short, and so speed was of utmost importance.

The nation as a whole shared these sentiments.\textsuperscript{123} After Munich, though perhaps before, the government, the armed forces, and the citizenry finally realized that war was probably inevitable. The only question was not if, but when.

\textsuperscript{122} [MAF], Minute Sheet, 18 Oct. 1938, MAF 47/45, PRO.
\textsuperscript{123} Postan, \textit{British War Production}, 53.
CHAPTER FOUR

From Crisis to War, 1938–1939

In most cases detailed planning had been carried about as far as was practicable under peacetime conditions.

William Morrison

During 1939 the nation moved toward a war footing. Nevertheless, the preparations were not as rapid as they might have been. This was in part because, despite all the evidence to the contrary, the government still greatly desired peace, in part because the military had to reorient its thinking, and in part because it was taking time to convert the economy to wartime production. There had, of course, been steps in this direction before 1939, but now the pace accelerated.

Though foreign policy was the prime concern, the hope for peace, badly shaken during the Czech crisis, virtually disappeared on 15 March.1 On that day Hitler and his accomplices incorporated Bohemia and Moravia into the Greater Reich, turned Slovakia into a virtual protectorate, and granted neighbouring Poland and Hungary portions of the Czechoslovak state. Czechoslovakia, in effect, disappeared from the map. The reaction in Britain was one of disillusionment and outrage. Hadn’t Chamberlain had Hitler’s word at Munich that after the annexation of the Sudetenland, the western extremity of Czechoslovakia, Germany had no further territorial ambitions? Now, this dastardly thing had happened. Although British diplomats had been aware for a number of months that Germany had not been satisfied and was fomenting additional strife, Chamberlain felt betrayed. So long as there was the shred of a possibility for peace, Britain would continue to negotiate, but at the same time the country had to step up preparations for the eventuality of war.

The military had felt the same way for some time. Six months prior to the March dismemberment the services had signalled that their

priorities were changing and that war on the Continent had become a definite possibility. Thereafter, military planning with France began in earnest. The army started to prepare divisions—at first four, and then ten—for insertion on the Continent. The Royal Air Force, despite its continuing concern for defence of the home islands, still earmarked 468 of its projected total of 2,516 aircraft for deployment overseas. The Royal Navy also expanded in the number of ships and in tonnage launched, though its expansion meant that Britain had not forgotten the Dominions and Empire and the protection of seaborne trade. In addition, civil defence measures, including the solicitation of volunteers to serve as air raid wardens and the building of Anderson shelters in back gardens, were tangible reminders at home of the proximity of war.

The government’s problem, as it always is, was how to pay for the expansion. After Munich the Treasury’s constraints on the economy were eased. The government concluded that rearmament was the order of the day and decided to pay for it by borrowing rather than by taxation. The result was a large infusion of capital into the defence sector of the economy. Expenditures for defence reached £719 million during 1939 as compared with £463 million the year before. Even more impressive was that the percentage of Britain’s gross national product devoted to military expenditures more than doubled, from 7 per cent in 1938 to 18 per cent in 1939. This figure was still less than Germany’s 23 per cent, but the gap was narrowing. A side effect was that unemployment dropped from 2.16 million or 9.3 per cent in 1938 to 1.3 million or 5.8 per cent a year later. Thus one might contend that the economy, stimulated by rearmament, was rapidly approaching wartime status.

Even so, problems persisted. Besides the usual bottlenecks of insufficient skilled labour and a lack of industrial capacity, the trade balance continued to widen as exports declined and the need for imports increased. Moreover, the rearmament boom did not mean that the

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Treasury had thrown off all restraints, for it continued to assert that a semblance of financial stability had to be maintained. Just as importantly, to what extent should government take control of the economy at this juncture? That issue had led to the shift of Sir Thomas Inskip as Minister for the Coordination of Defence to Dominions secretary in January 1939. The reason had not been so much that Inskip was doing an inadequate job as it was that he had become convinced the government needed to intervene more forcefully into directing the economy. Inskip’s thinking, however, was almost the opposite of what governmental officials were doing. To be sure, they had plans to take control of raw materials, labour, and as we are emphasizing food, in time of war. But they did not want to coerce private firms as rearmament was proceeding, since they were depending on the expertise of their top executives as well as on their industrial plants to produce goods. Nor was the government willing to establish controls on prices and profits, or even to work out plans for doing so during wartime. Given Britain’s capitalist tradition, such restraint is understandable, but, in retrospect, the government should have exercised more control as the country rearmed.

A final example, among many, of the government’s timidity during this period is the Military Training Act of April 1939. Although precedent-setting in that it was passed during peacetime, the bill was actually quite limited. It was to last three years, though it could be cancelled or extended, and it was to apply annually to only 80,000 men between 20 and 21 years of age, or about one-third of those eligible within the age group. Despite its limited nature, it especially upset Labour Party and trade union leaders not only because they opposed it in principle, but also because they were not consulted.

Overall, then, prior to the outbreak of war in September, rearmament in Britain had moved ahead. There was, however, an admixture of foreign policy, economic, political, and military factors that had inhibited the speed at which it proceeded.

These constraints obviously had an impact on food and agriculture, but they did not prevent the Ministry of Agriculture and the Food (Defence Plans) Department from filling out and refining their existing

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plans for wartime controls. For Agriculture, besides its usual business, its main concerns were increased production, organization, and labour and its corollary, mechanization. For Food (Defence Plans), the list was much longer. Besides organization, it had to deal with prices and profits, individual commodity control schemes, food reserves, evacuation, overseas supplies, transport and storage, and rationing. Another area—nutrition—raised its head, but because of its long-term nature, both Food (Defence Plans) and Agriculture officials were too busy to give it much thought. They did, however, set up a mechanism for resolving conflicts of interest which were bound to arise between the two departments.

But before examining the changes that took place in these areas prior to the war, it is necessary to look into changes that occurred in the leadership of Agriculture and Food (Defence Plans). While the changes probably did not alter the course that both entities were taking, it did have important implications for the future.

The first change was the replacement of William Morrison as Minister of Agriculture by Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith on 29 January 1939. As a consequence of this alteration—it was part of the cabinet reorganization that had shifted Inskip from defence coordinator to the Dominions Office—Dorman-Smith (1899–1977), the 39-year-old former army officer and recent president of the National Farmers’ Union, became the government’s top agricultural official. His appointment also signified to most observers that the symbiosis between the government and the NFU, already far advanced, was now complete. The change did not mean the end of Morrison’s presence, however, since he was named Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. It soon became apparent that among his duties—the position had similarities to a minister without portfolio—would be to oversee Food (Defence Plans), and thus he would become Minister of Food in case of war.

But there was more behind the reshuffle than merely bringing ‘the farmers’ friend’, Dorman-Smith, into the cabinet, since Morrison was also considered a friend. In the background was Chamberlain’s 2 July speech at Kettering. It will be recalled that the speech had caused a furore in the countryside, and no matter what the government said to make amends, farmers and farm groups remained sceptical of Chamberlain’s intentions. In the NFU Record in August 1938 an editorial proclaimed: ‘The storm aroused by Mr. Chamberlain’s speech at

6 The Times, 30 Jan. 1939, 12. 7 345 HC Deb., 1938–9, cols. 2980–1, 6 Apr. 1939.
Kettering has largely subsided, but it will take the Government a long time to dissipate all the anxiety and fears which the speech occasioned.” In the same issue, the NFU made public a memorandum, supported by its Council, to dispel mistaken notions in the Prime Minister’s speech and to discuss what it considered the real needs of farmers. The NFU said it was not true that the Union supported ‘self-sufficiency in [domestic] food supplies—a view which has never been advocated in responsible agricultural quarters’, but the agricultural community still hoped ‘to play its full part in the nation’s defence programme’. Unfortunately, the memo went on, given the conditions today, home agriculture will not be able to do its part. While the government claims it favours ‘a prosperous agriculture’, it has not taken sufficiently bold measures to enable farmers and farm workers to achieve prosperity. In fact, while the value of agricultural land, prices for goods, acreage tilled, and workers employed have fallen, the farmers’ production costs have ‘constantly tended upwards’. The memo concluded that the NFU Council ‘regards it as a matter of extreme urgency that the Government should make a more definite response . . . [so that] home agriculture should be enabled to fulfil its vital functions both in times of peace and of national emergency’. Criticism of the government continued in the September Record. In an article entitled ‘The Immediate Agricultural Situation’, the writer ended by saying, ‘the immediate situation [for the farmer] goes from bad to worse. Is it any wonder that the growing feeling of discontent is showing itself in the agricultural community in all parts of the country?’

The National Farmers’ Union was correct. Similar sentiments were erupting throughout rural Britain. In Norfolk, the nation’s centre for wheat farming and an area of protest for a number of decades, John W. Whittome of Doddington wrote a letter to the Eastern Daily Press. He said, ‘The time is long overdue for all agriculturalists to make a protest [to the Government] . . . The farmers have done their best, but the position is now not only unbearable, it is impossible.’ He contended that farmers in the area needed to organize, to have a meeting, and he hoped our friends in Yorkshire would attend, too. Suffolk farmers were equally upset and planned to dramatize their discontent by sponsoring a protest march on 1 February 1939.

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But before the march took place, matters took a critical turn in Norfolk. On 26 January there was to be a by-election for the parliamentary seat to represent East Norfolk. Three candidates were in the race: J. F. Wright, a Conservative and secretary of the local NFU; Frank Medlicott, a National Liberal; and Norman Tillett, a Labourite. Wright’s candidacy was clouded by the fact that he opposed the government’s agricultural policy, and that the National Farmers’ Union did not endorse Wright, despite his NFU affiliation, for fear of losing votes. But the message was clear: the Conservative Party could no longer take agriculturally oriented districts for granted, and there was a distinct possibility that the NFU would put up its own candidates in future elections.

The Conservatives, for their part, felt they had little alternative but to back the Liberal candidate, Medlicott, since Wright thought the government’s programme for agriculture was too weak. On the 18th, however, Wright withdrew from the race, thus making Medlicott the heavy favourite and easing the fear that a split vote would swing the election to Labour. The reason Wright withdrew was that he had received a letter from Chamberlain, in which the Prime Minister ‘pledged to proceed as quickly as possible with whatever legislation is necessary to implement the decisions of the Ministry of Agriculture after their discussions with the NFU’. As a result of Wright’s withdrawal the Liberal Medlicott won easily with 18,257 votes to Labourite Tillett’s 10,785. On 28 January an Eastern Daily Press editorial pointed out that even though Medlicott was a lawyer from London, this did not disqualify ‘him from becoming a strong and competent advocate of the claims of agriculture’.

On the 29th Chamberlain announced Dorman-Smith’s appointment. On the 31st the agricultural correspondent of The Times disclosed that the farmers’ protest march, scheduled for the next day (but not supported by the NFU), would probably be transformed into a demonstration welcoming the new Minister of Agriculture into office, and this is indeed what happened.

In the meantime Dorman-Smith indicated that in his interview with Chamberlain just before his appointment was made public he had agreed to have discussions with representatives of his National Farmers’ Union and with other farm groups. This agreement fulfilled

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Chamberlain’s pledge to Wright before his withdrawal from the East Norfolk by-election. During the next several months, Dorman-Smith duly talked with NFU leaders—almost on a weekly basis—to get their input for future legislation. The meetings also included representatives from Scotland’s and Northern Ireland’s farmer unions. Also during this time Dorman-Smith met with the Central Landowners’ Association and the Scottish Land and Property Federation to solicit the views of the large landowners, and with the National Union of Agricultural Workers and the Scottish Farm Servants to get an understanding of the issues on the minds of farm workers. Therefore, at least for the time being, the farming community was to have a forum for airing their concerns and to have Dorman-Smith, one of their own, as a minister in the government. But more importantly, the Conservatives had nipped an incipient countryside revolt in the bud.

The outcome of the discussions between the ministry and the major farm groups was the Agricultural Development Act of 1939. As might be expected, it addressed the usual farmers’ interests, but it was also definitely oriented toward preparations for war. The most significant feature was a £2 per acre grant to farmers to plough up their pastures or idle land and turn them into cropland or new grassland. It was to apply to additional land ploughed between 3 May and 30 September (later extended to 31 October). Although no specific figure was given, officials hoped that by the 1940 harvest 1.7 million more acres would be under cultivation or in temporary grass. What this meant, of course, was that farmers were to undertake a war-oriented measure before a war ever broke out. It further meant that the ploughing up campaign would be expensive for farmers, since the general trend in the 1930s had been a shift from arable to livestock farming, and that trend now had to be reversed.

The bill’s other provisions also had a preparations for war cast to them. Deficiency payments on oats and barley were widened to guarantee a better price and thus stimulate further production, and a payment plan was introduced to encourage raising more sheep, since they

14 MAF, 6 Mar. 1939, MAF 53/134, PRO, and MAF, 17 Apr. 1939, MAF 53/134, PRO.
15 Central Landowners’ Association (CLA), 23 Feb. 1939, MAF 53/139, PRO, and PI 26, 27 Feb. 1939, MAF 53/139, PRO.
were generally not dependent on imported feed. The act further provided additional grants for drainage and gave the government the authority to purchase and store fertilizers and tractors. The tractors were to be under the control of the county executive committees.

The 1939 Act and other war-related developments brought about changes in the ministry’s organizational structure. The alterations in London were not too difficult to accomplish, since the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries employed more than 3,500 civil servants, who could be shifted around to meet special needs. In time of war, it was to consist of seventeen divisions. All of them would focus on war matters, but those particularly pertinent would be finance, manpower (including a branch for women labourers), land drainage, land fertility, animal health, farm supplies, and local organization.

More drastic would be the changes in the outlying areas where the county committees and their subdivisions were to direct the food production campaign. Although not yet officially called into existence, chairmen for the committees had already been selected, and they had begun, in consultation with ministry officials, to enlist the other committee members, procure space for offices, and develop the framework to carry out its tasks. Most of the chairmen were local landlords or prominent farmers, but once in a while the person chosen was less than ideal. Parliament picked up on one such appointee, a retired major general, Sir Reginald Ford, the Chief Divisional Food Officer for London and the Home Counties. Several MPs were upset that Ford was ‘temporarily’ living in Brussels rather than in London. As one member complained, it would be difficult for Ford to carry out his duties across the Channel. A Mr Pritt went even further, asking, ‘Will the people who assist us in the next war be in Berlin’? The next week members learned that Ford had resigned his office, since he desired to remain in Brussels.

Another critical area for agriculture was the labour supply. In the background were several factors that exacerbated the problem: the continuing decline in the number of persons working on farms, low pay in comparison with other industries, and other grievances, such as tied
cottages, often in poor repair, and a lack of amenities. Still, there were about 1.1 million farmers, farm workers, casual labourers, and others engaged in agriculture in the United Kingdom before the war. (This figure also included lumbermen.) Of this total, men over 21 years of age fully employed were to be deferred, and those between 18 and 21 were to be reserved if they had ‘key’ jobs. One exception was those in the Territorial Army and other reserves, who were to be called up at war’s outset. A second exception was those individuals affected by the Military Training Act, though they were to undergo training during off-peak periods, which for agriculture would be the winter months. But if war broke out they, too, would be called to active duty.

During 1939 the government began to take steps not only to replace those immediately called up, but also to find substitutes for farm workers who decided to join despite their reserved status. Although officials made plans to use a variety of options, the most widely publicized effort was the Women’s Land Army. With Lady Denman directing the effort and with the help of local authorities, a national recruiting campaign was launched in the spring. In June county chairpersons met and discussed procedures. By the time the call came in September, more than one thousand volunteers had already signed up, and soon afterwards WLA recruits—one trained, others semi-trained—began to be sent to farmsteads. As a result of this and other measures, the farm labour issue never became as critical as expected.

An additional method to overcome the anticipated problem of insufficient workers was increased mechanization. Farm mechanization usually conjures up an image of large numbers of tractors with implements attached planting and harvesting crops in great abundance across a vast, seemingly infinite countryside, but this image was far from the reality. While the government just before the war did contract with Ford to buy as many tractors as it could produce, farm mechanization in Britain was just beginning. In addition, mechanization

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20 Feinstein, National Income, 125.
22 J. R. Lloyd Davies, Ministry of Labour, to E. L. Mitchell, MAF, 10 July 1939, MAF 47/5, PRO.
included other machines, such as combines and milking machines, but like tractors their use was also in its initial stages. The 20,000 milking machines in use, for instance, serviced about 15 per cent of the industry, and the 56,200 tractors in England and Wales were only about 25 per cent of those available by war’s end. By contrast, there were still 700,000 horses on farms, and they provided the bulk of the work accomplished. Even so, tractors and other machines did help alleviate the labour shortage at first and became an increasingly important factor as the war progressed.

When one turns to the food sector, it is good to keep in mind how pervasive the food business had become in previous decades and the changes that had come about. For one thing, most of Britain’s 48 million inhabitants had experienced a rise in income, and this was part of the reason why they spent less of their budget on food, 35 per cent in 1938 as compared with 60 per cent in 1914. Moreover, they were treated to a much wider range of foods, including pre-packaged goods. The amount of canned vegetables, for example, rose from 24 million tons in 1920–2 to 193 million tons in 1937–8, and the volume of canned goods purchased abroad rose dramatically as well. At the same time people’s diets changed with more meat, fruit, vegetables, butter and margarine, and eggs consumed, approximately 50 per cent more in 1934 than before World War I. Part of the increased consumption can be attributed to a rising population, but it was not all that much, having increased by only two million between 1931 and 1939.

These alterations were reflected in the industry itself. Although there were still 80,000 groceries, 40,000 butcher’s markets, 30,000 bakeries, and 30,000 greengrocer shops, there were a growing number of chain stores, especially in the cities. There were also changes in production and distribution, as firms became larger. Tate and Lyle, for instance, controlled sugar refining; Rank’s, Spiller’s, and Cooperative Wholesale flour millers controlled their industry; and United Dairies controlled the London milk market.

Food (Defence Plans) had to take these changing conditions into account as it attempted to prepare the food sector for war. By 1939, while the department had accomplished a good deal, a good deal remained

to be done. Of the eight major areas in which changes occurred during the year, none was more important than the department’s organization. Officials considered five sectors to be especially pertinent: the central office, commissions and marketing boards, divisional and local committees, trade advisers, and food-related employees.

At the central office, or headquarters, the two major changes were in the number of personnel and in the number of divisions. Not surprisingly, both expanded exponentially. In September 1938 Food (Defence Plans) consisted of 106 persons. By April 1939 it had risen to 174, and by September it was 375. If war broke out, the department anticipated an even more phenomenal increase of approximately 950 personnel within the first three months. Some of these individuals were to come from other departments in the Board of Trade, others from the commissions and marketing boards now located in the Agriculture ministry, still others from inside and outside the government. Although Food (Defence Plans) did not estimate what the eventual total figure would be, it did indicate that at one point during the Great War the Food ministry had had 2,450 persons working in its central office. The implication was that at least that many would be needed this time.

Regarding the organizational set-up, in March the department had its top position filled by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, William Morrison; retained Sir Henry French as director; and expanded the number of divisions from two to seven. The last were organized as follows:

Division I: Organization. It was to oversee the outlying divisional and local food control committees and rationing, which included the retail establishments. It was also to look after the headquarters and to plan ahead to ensure a smooth transition to the Food ministry.

Division II: Public Relations. It was to deal with parliamentary business, issue bulletins to the press, and handle legal matters. It was further to maintain contact with other departments, such as the Ministry of Health, which was responsible for the evacuation schemes, and the Lord Privy Seal’s office, which was involved in oversight of the nation’s regional set up.

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27 ‘Conference of Trade Advisers’ and Food (Defence Plans) Department, ‘Reorganisation of May 1939’, May 1939, MAF 72/560, PRO.
Division III: General Supply. This was one of three supply divisions. It was under E. M. H. Lloyd, who had headed one of the two divisions prior to 1939, and, as the title implies, Division III was to concern itself with general questions. These included relations with the Dominions, Empire, and foreign countries, the highly sensitive issue of war risk insurance, shipping, road and rail transport, and in time of war, supplies for the fighting services and ships’ stores.

Division IV: Supply Commodity I. It was divided into three branches and was to deal broadly with what French called crops. Branch A was responsible for grain (including the brewing and distillery industries); Branch B for sugar, tea, dried fruits, and miscellaneous groceries; and Branch C for fish, potatoes, fresh fruits and vegetables (including canned), milk, coffee, cocoa, and biscuits.

Division V: Supply Commodity II. It was also divided into three branches: A was to look after meat and animal fats; B after butter, cheese, and eggs; and C after margarine and oils.

Division VI: London Problem. This division was considered necessary, since London constituted an entity of vast proportions, and French wanted to make sure that the plans for London were in consonance with the plans for the rest of the country. As a result, Sir William Goodchild was appointed divisional head. He was further to deal with the distribution problems that were expected to arise in London at the outbreak of hostilities and to have storage areas ready on the city’s outskirts. Once war had broken out, it was to be enfolded into the supply divisions as soon as practicable.

Division VII: Storage. It was responsible for the food reserves. Like the London division, it was to become part of the supply divisions during wartime. But after the war broke out storage remained a separate entity at least during the early stages.

Thus, in time of war, there turned out to be six divisions as part of a fully-fledged Food ministry. The ministry was also to have the usual ministerial apparatus. At the top would be the Minister of Food, Morrison, who would also be the Food Controller. He would have First and Second Secretaries, a Deputy Secretary, Parliamentary Secretary, Finance Secretary, and an Administrative Council, made up of the secretaries and two or three special advisers, such as Commercial, Scientific, and Economic advisers. Although not stated, the implication was that French would become First Secretary, and that is indeed what happened. Quinton Hill, the other divisional head besides Lloyd before the 1939 reorganization, eventually became Deputy Secretary.
The inclusion of French, Lloyd, and Hill assured continuity for the new ministry.

The other organizational changes do not require as detailed an explanation as those that took place in the London office, but they were equally important. One, already alluded to, was the transfer of the commissions and marketing boards from Agriculture to the Food ministry. The shift was to include most of the personnel of the three commissions—Wheat, Sugar, and Livestock—and of the five marketing boards—Milk, Potatoes, Bacon, Bacon Development, and Pigs. The boards, it will be recalled, had been established early in the decade, and they were a combination of public and private enterprises in that they were producer controlled and yet sponsored by the government. This situation led to close contact and cooperation between commission and board members and Agriculture officials, and this cooperative spirit was also present in 1939, when the commissions and boards lent a helping hand to Food (Defence Plans) in carrying out its work. The excellent relations were expected to continue if or when the boards and commissions officially became part of the Ministry of Food.

Another change occurred at the divisional and local levels, although the changes in this instance pertained more to selecting additional officers than to altering the existing structure. All the nineteen divisional officers for England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland had been named and ‘could function immediately’. In addition, Food Executive Officers for the 1,413 local committees (down slightly from the original estimate of 1,527) had been nominated and ‘given instructions on their duties’. Finally, though the local committees ‘would not be set up until after the outbreak of war’, the Executive Officers and governmental officials were contacting potential members and readying facilities, which were at first to house the local offices. Once again, no total figure was given, but the department anticipated that at least 25,000 persons would be involved in local food control.

The fourth area of organizational change was also not a matter of reorganization, but of selecting key personnel as trade advisers. In keeping with the government’s policy of enlisting the aid of the country’s business and industrial leaders, by April 1939 Food (Defence


29 FS 48, 31 Mar. 1939, CAB 16/158, PRO, and [F(DP)D], 30 Apr. 1939, MAF 72/88, PRO.
Plans) had a trade director appointed for each of its fourteen commodity control schemes. The schemes dealt with all the essential foods, from cereals and sugar to tea and potatoes. On the 19th French called upon the trade advisers to meet with him. Although part of the conference was devoted to acquainting them with the organization and functioning of the wartime Food ministry, part of the meeting was taken up thanking them for their willingness to participate and having them realize the arduous nature of their patriotic undertaking. As French stated:

We [the department] feel proud of the team from the food trades which has agreed to serve side by side with us in the preparatory work which still remains to be done and to cooperate with us in the actual conduct of Food Control should, unfortunately, this country be involved in hostilities in the near future.

He also cautioned them to use their knowledge and experience not to benefit themselves or their trade, but ‘for the benefit of the nation’. In his view, ‘if you [the trade advisers and governmental officials] succeed in maintaining an adequate and efficient service of food to all parts of the United Kingdom, you will have made a great contribution towards winning the war’.

The fifth, and final, organizational issue relates to the status of food-related employees. The food industry never received as high a priority as agriculture among the reserved occupations, since various jobs in the food sector did not require specialized skills. But food processors did warrant consideration, and so those over 30 years old and involved in baking, slaughtering, fish curing, milk and cheese production and the like were not to be called up unless they could be replaced. This regulation once again underlined the government’s recognition that food was a critical element in the nation’s defence.

The second major concern for Food (Defence Plans) in 1939 was prices and profits. In this instance, always lurking in the background was the influence of the Treasury. Though not as significant a force as earlier, it was still a factor that civil servants constantly kept in mind. As French stated to the trade advisers in April, ‘If you . . . [help us] succeed in restricting the upward movement of price levels you will have made an important contribution towards keeping down the cost of the war, to the benefit of this generation and of generations to come’.

30 F(DP)D, 19 Apr. 1939, MAF 53/132, PRO.
31 NS(SRO)2, 31 Jan. and Mar. 1939, CAB 57/28, PRO.
32 F(DP)D, 19 Apr. 1939, MAF 53/132, PRO.
The department’s concern led to the formation of an Inter-Departmental Committee on Wartime Control of Food Prices. It consisted of representatives from Food (Defence Plans), Agriculture, Scotland’s Department of Agriculture, and Northern Ireland’s Ministry of Agriculture. French served as the committee’s chair, and its first meeting was 17 January 1939. Throughout the year it examined the details of preventing an unnecessary rise in the price of home-produced foods. Based on the long-held premiss that prices should reflect those which existed at the time war broke out, the department carried through on this principle in September for wheat, oats, barley, feeding stuffs, milk, cattle, sheep, pigs, and potatoes. In fact, however, not all of the products were subjected to price controls immediately because of a lack of personnel at headquarters. The prices were to be pegged for two-to-three months, at which time the department would take another look, and they also reflected the government’s subsidy programme, which in 1939 amounted to £41 million.

The issue of profits in food and agriculture was not studied as closely as prices, but everyone expected the government to institute some type of controls on excess profits, which in fact happened in November. With regard to the other essential element—wages—they were also not controlled prior to the war, though again controls were soon put in force. Even so, with a few exceptions, such as basic food prices, the government’s unwillingness to make sufficient plans for controlling all vital sectors of the economy caused difficulties during the early months of the war.

The third area of concern, and the heart of the department’s food policy, was its commodity control schemes. They were finished by early 1939, numbered fourteen in all, and were as follows:

- cereals, flour, and bread
- bacon and hams
- animal feeding stuffs
- butter and cheese
- oilseeds and oils
- margarine and cooking fats
- meat and livestock
- tea
- fish
- potatoes
- eggs
- lard
- milk
- sugar

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33 Inter-Departmental Committee on War-Time Control of Food Prices, 1st Meeting, 17 Jan. 1939, MAF 72/106, PRO; WPC/10, ‘Provisional Proposals . . .’, 14 Aug. 1939, MAF 72/106, PRO; and [F(DP)D], 9 Sept. 1939, MAF 72/106, PRO.
34 Rollings, ‘Whitehall and the Control of Prices and Profits’, 3.
35 FS 48, 31 Mar. 1939, MAF 16/158, PRO, and [F(DP)D], 30 Apr. 1939, MAF 72/88, PRO.
The schemes were vertically organized to control each commodity from the time it was produced until it was distributed to retailers. The distribution phase was particularly tricky for wholesale grocers and provisions dealers, whose storage areas might be destroyed because of bombing attacks. The department had prepared a plan whereby the wholesalers and dealers would ‘form into groups to assist one another with distribution in time of war’. The final step also made provision for what the retailer would have to pay for goods. To oversee the process, each product had assigned to it a director and an advisory committee, which during wartime would become a control board. The department took advantage of top officials and business leaders in each trade to staff these committees. Members of the milk marketing boards and the wheat commission, for example, were to help control their areas, and the President of the Margarine Manufacturers Association and executives from Lever Brothers and Unilever were to oversee margarine and cooking fats. The department considered each board to be an independent entity and thus would not have to be located in London.

The most promising aspect of the schemes was that as early as the end of April Food (Defence Plans) had selected the key personnel, and they were ‘engaged in making themselves familiar with the duties they will have to discharge’. By the end of July the central office had actually held rehearsals for oilseeds, bacon, sugar, meat, and fish. The relative success of the exercises prompted French to tell a panel of industrialists:

I have every reason to feel the headquarters’ officers if they were summoned to the office immediately on the outbreak of war would know exactly what was expected of them and could carry out and execute their functions [accordingly] . . .36

The changes in the fourth area of concern—food reserves—were mainly a matter of Food (Defence Plans) enlarging what had already been done.37 The government had already bought quantities of wheat, sugar, and whale oil as reserve stocks in April 1938, and the September emergency unleashed a flurry of activity during the following spring to purchase additional reserves. But it took time to get another £5 million appropriated for more wheat and sugar and for 30,000 tons of canned meat and fish, 30,000 tons of frozen meat, 25,000 tons of lard,

36 IP, 58th Meeting, 24 July 1939, MAF 72/90, PRO.
5,000 tons of butter, and 10,000 tons of cheese. As it turned out, only the 100,000 additional tons of wheat had been purchased and delivered when the war intervened. Also by this point officials in Food (Defence Plans) were questioning whether reserves of meat and cheese were really necessary, and whether more reserves might be considered over-insurance, since they were slated for use only during the initial period of dislocation. Nevertheless, reserves of 500,000 tons of wheat, 150,000 tons of sugar, and 240,000 tons of whale oil for margarine were now available.

The fifth concern was evacuations. They had appeared on the scene during the Munich crisis, and even though the planned evacuations had not been implemented, voluntary migrations had occurred, and it now became a major concern. The schemes were to apply to all the major cities, not just London, and were under the overall direction of the Minister of Health, Walter Elliot. In the food area, this meant providing rations for men, women, and children at intermediate stations and at receiving points for up to 48 hours after the evacuations began. Children were a special concern because they were to be taken out of their schools by class, put on trains, and accompanied by their teachers to prearranged destinations. Each child’s ration was to consist of one can of meat, two cans of milk, two packets of biscuits, a quarter-pound of chocolate, and a carrier bag for the food. For adults, an extra can of meat was to be provided. By mid-August, the meat and milk were in place, and the biscuits and chocolate were being held at the manufacturers awaiting delivery when necessary to the detraining stations. The department also arranged for traders to increase supplies in shops in the reception areas to meet the increased demand. The main problem at this point, as Elliot acknowledged, was not food but the reluctance of parents to agree to have their children register for what was a voluntary programme.

In the sixth area—overseas trade—much had been accomplished prior to 1939, but now the pace slackened. Part of the problem was that preparatory arrangements with other countries generally tend to be slow because of the political complexities involved. Another part of the problem was that British officials thought it ‘a mistake in peacetime

38 [F(DP)D], [Press Clippings], 10 Jan. 1939, MAF 47/45, PRO; FP 1839/38, 28 Apr. 1939, HH 50/22, SRO; FP 3339, 17 Aug. 1939, HH 50/22, SRO; and CID, 371st Meeting, 1 Aug. 1939, CAB 2/9, PRO.
39 FS 48, 31 Mar. 1939, CAB 26/158, PRO, and [FDPD], Minute Sheet, 15 Feb. 1939, MAF 72/555, PRO.
to attempt to negotiate with firms overseas for contracts in time of war’ because in these instances prices would normally be higher than they would be otherwise.

Yet, by summer, some progress was being made.\textsuperscript{40} For instance, details were being worked out for chartering ships on behalf of Food (Defence Plans) and for providing war risk insurance for goods being shipped. Just as importantly, preparations were underway to determine which specific commodities should be purchased in specific countries and to choose agents for buying abroad if war should break out. Finally, a ‘shadow’ Imports Board was formed to coordinate the entire effort of buying and shipping food. When the war erupted it became the Overseas Purchases Board. The problem with all the boards, however, was that they could only advise, not decide policy, which was left in the hands of the various ministries. Therefore, in spite of promising discussions with the Dominions, Empire, and foreign nations about what they could expect from Britain to keep their trade intact in time of war, the effort was still uncoordinated at the outset.

The seventh concern was transportation and storage.\textsuperscript{41} By 1939 the situation seemed well in hand, with the Ministry of Transport coordinating the distribution preparations through the public rail and private haulage industries. With regard to storage, because of the bombing threat, plans were undertaken to provide alternative warehouse facilities for food items at locations on the outskirts of London, such as St Albans and Uxbridge, rather than depending solely on storage areas inside the city. Food (Defence Plans) also continued to work on finding additional cold storage for meat outside London at places throughout the country and providing warehouse space at the western ports, which were expected to receive more food shipments once the war started.

Eighth, and finally, there were several changes that came about in preparing the country for rationing.\textsuperscript{42} To be sure, the process had been determined—from households to retailers who would supply the rationed goods to food committees that would provide oversight at the

\textsuperscript{40} FS 48, 31 Mar. 1939, CAB 16/158, PRO; Food (Defence Plans) Department, ‘Note of Meeting on Imports Policy and Procedures’, 14 June 1939, MAF 72/109, PRO; FD 4798, ‘Establishment of Overseas Purchases Board’, 14 July 1939, MAF 72/109, PRO; and FD 4798, 12 Sept. 1939, MAF 72/109, PRO.

\textsuperscript{41} FS 48, 31 Mar. 1939, CAB 16/158, PRO, and Food (Defence Plans) Department, ‘First Report . . .’, 27 June 1939, MAF 72/87, PRO.

\textsuperscript{42} FS 48, 31 Mar. 1939, CAB 16/158, PRO; Hammond, Food, ii. 427–49; and The Times, 14 June 1939, 8.
local level. The foods anticipated to be rationed—meat, ham and bacon, butter and margarine, fats, and sugar—had also been determined (tea was added later) and the public informed. For various reasons the department had decided not to ration fish, fresh fruits and vegetables, and especially bread and potatoes. But it had completed work on the necessary documents and their composition. They included household applications, general ration books (for six months), temporary ration cards in case the ration books were not ready, and a number of special books or cards for children, adolescent boys, travellers, seamen, service personnel on leave, and ‘heavy’ workers. The last group consisted of agricultural labourers and fishermen as well as twelve other categories.

What remained for Food (Defence Plans) to do was to ensure that the documents were printed and available locally and to issue permits to retailers. In accomplishing these tasks, the department was only partially successful. It was able to get the various documents printed, though the 78 million ration books were not ready until the last moment in August, but it did not have the permit system in place when the war started. This factor and the slowness of making sure people were eligible for rationing by using the national registration system, along with last-minute political complications, delayed its introduction until January 1940.

One area which both Agriculture and Food (Defence Plans) neglected during the period was nutrition. Their neglect was not because they were unaware of the issue. As we have emphasized, a number of scientists and agricultural economists had studied it, Sir John Boyd Orr had popularized its beneficial effects, and Sir William Beveridge had included it as a significant element in his rationing scheme. Moreover, interest in nutrition had continued for the rest of the decade.43 One example was the government’s ‘Drink More Milk’ campaign. While the hoped for increase in consumption did not occur, another campaign for ‘Milk in Schools’ did better, with approximately 50 per cent of elementary school children receiving one-third of a pint of milk per day. In a further development Lord Astor broadcast on the importance of meat, milk, eggs, fruits, and vegetables in our diet ‘especially as these are health foods’. And at a conference on ‘The Wider Aspects of

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43 Burnett, Plenty and Want, 320–1; Muriel Grant, Propaganda and the Role of the State in Inter-War Britain (Oxford, 1994), 195–8; Astor, ‘Production or Perish’, 18 Apr. 1939, MS 1066/1/959, URL; and The Times, 28 Apr. 1939, 7.
Nutrition’, sponsored by the British Medical Association, 400 delegates heard, among others, Lord Astor; Sir John Russell, the head of Rothamstead Experimental Station; Sir Arthur Salter; and Keith Murray analyse the role of nutrition in a long-term food policy.

Still, nutrition did not warrant a high priority among the departments preparing the food sector for war. A partial explanation is probably tied in with the reluctance of many farmers to accept the findings of food and agricultural scientists. The farmers’ sceptical attitude toward those impractical persons ‘in white coats’ was tempered by a sneaking suspicion they might be right. But the scepticism carried over to the Agriculture ministers and others in the ministry, who were more concerned about bettering the lot of their constituency than about nutrition per se. Another partial explanation is that as Food (Defence Plans) and Agriculture officials became involved in the details of preparing the nation for food control during wartime, nutrition seemed to fall out of the equation. Their response to the question, What about nutrition?, would probably have been, Yes, no doubt it is important, but we don’t have time to deal with it right now.

On a more positive note, cooperation between the two departments most concerned with food control—Food (Defence Plans) and Agriculture—began to be cemented during the period. Although both were well aware that the division of responsibilities—home production for Agriculture and the other aspects of food control for Food (Defence Plans)—was clearly defined, the division often became blurred in practice. Farmers especially were wary of the food department, whom they perceived as not always doing things in their best interest. French and Sir Donald Ferguson, Agriculture’s permanent secretary, set out to overcome the problem. During the year before the war, at least two things occurred that demonstrated their willingness to work together. One was to have the staffs of the boards and commissions help out Food (Defence Plans) in its war preparations, even though they were still legally under the Agriculture ministry. French and Ferguson wanted to make sure that the officials understood why their assistance to a department outside Agriculture was necessary, and that they further understood they were to be transferred to the newly created Food ministry in case of war. A second example was that French and

44 Astor to Keith Murray, 6 Jan. 1939, MS 1066/1/958, URL.
45 [FD/P/D], French to Ferguson, 17 Oct. 1938, MAF 53/132, PRO; [MAF], ‘Action Taken by MAF . . .’, 7 Feb. 1939, MAF 39/34, PRO; and MAF, Sept. 1939, MAF 39/20, PRO.
Fergusson also took steps to deal with the potential problem of animal feed. In this instance Food (Defence Plans) was to keep track of the total supply of feeding stuffs and to make sure of their distribution to grain dealers, while Agriculture was to be responsible for ascertaining farmers’ requirements and notifying the Food ministry of any feed farmers had available for sale. This spirit of cooperation became even more pronounced after September 1939.

Although World War II began on 1 September, and Britain entered two days later, the country had already commenced preparing for it. On 21 August a defence Sub-Committee directed governmental departments to start assuming a wartime posture.46 On the 24th parliament passed an Emergency Powers Act, and the machinery for war now began to take definite shape. How well prepared was the food sector at this point? How well had Food (Defence Plans) and Agriculture done in getting the government and the nation ready?

We have emphasized that between 1936 and 1939 they had accomplished a good deal, and the official historians, Keith (later Lord) Murray and Richard Hammond generally share this view.47 They did, however, contend there were difficulties. Murray, who concentrates on the preparations in agriculture, points to the main problems as being inadequate measures to ensure the labour supply, no reserves of animal feed, and no definite system of price controls. He is also critical of matters of timing. In his view the ministry failed to have sufficient reserves of fertilizers and tractors on hand, had not readied enough pastureland for crop production, and had started the ploughing up campaign too late to have an effect when the war broke out.

Hammond focuses on the food sector. His specific criticisms are sprinkled throughout his massive three-volume study, but he is particularly upset that a number of the commodity control schemes, such as those for meat, fish, and potatoes, did not work well during the early months of the war. His more general criticisms are that Food (Defence Plans) had no long-range food policy, and that, on a broader scale, the government inconsistently applied controls—in the sense some were gradual, some immediate—over the various elements of the economy. In his opinion this led to an uncoordinated effort that was alleviated only ‘by the pressure of events’.

46 CID, K306, 21 Aug. 1939, CAB 15/24, PRO.
While a number of Murray’s and Hammond’s criticisms are no doubt valid, they are still incomplete, and for at least three reasons. First, as stated before, Murray and Hammond were primarily concerned with the war itself, not with the preparations that preceded it. Second, though their scholarship is first-rate, they were writing so close to the events that they lacked perspective. This lack of perspective can be seen in their approach to food control. With Murray emphasizing agriculture and Hammond food, they missed certain things that would have been evident had they looked at both elements. And third, their analysis should have been undertaken within a broader context. By taking into account primarily governmental decisions and activities, they failed to relate adequately the influence of the government’s actions on outside groups and on the public at large. Conversely, they did not appreciate sufficiently instances when lobby groups and the people actually had an influence on what the government did.

But before looking into the relationship between the government’s war preparations in the food area and the groups and people that were expected to carry them out, it would be helpful, taking Murray’s and Hammond’s criticisms into account, to summarize the achievements and shortcomings of the Agriculture ministry and Food (Defence Plans) at this point.

With respect to Agriculture, it is good to keep in mind the conditions with which the ministry had to cope. Despite governmental concern, which had taken the form of subsidies, commissions and marketing boards, measures to improve farming practices, and increased opportunities for education and advice, agriculture during the 1930s remained a depressed industry. To be sure, there had been some improvement, but it was not very impressive. Without going into detail, the average income of a full-time farmer in 1938 was estimated at £160 per year, that of a farm worker about £100, or less than half of the latter’s industrial counterpart. In addition, conditions at farmsteads and in labourers’ dwellings remained for the most part primitive, prices for crops continued to be low, and the amount of cropland as compared with grassland declined as the farmer strove to eke out a living.

situation gave rise to numerous complaints from farmers and increased resentment against the government no matter what it was attempting to do. It also led observers to assert that the government’s measures were not really effective, but merely ‘first aid’.

In this atmosphere of discontent the Agriculture ministry still did well in preparing the farming community for war. It was able to do so because, with the concurrence of most farm groups, it linked farmers’ concerns with what would be expected of them during wartime. Among the ministry’s accomplishments, its central office was ready to function, the marketing boards and commissions were prepared to be transferred to the Food ministry, and the heads of the county war committees had been selected and their duties set forth. The £2 subsidy to stimulate crop production was in force, and arrangements had begun for reserves of fertilizers, tractors, and petrol, though not on a scale Murray thought acceptable. Nor in his opinion had adequate attention been paid to supplying labour in the countryside, but the ministry had fought hard to have farm workers placed on the list of reserved occupations, and the Women’s Land Army was starting to function. While other groups, such as school children, might have been contacted to help with chores and field work, it was perhaps better not to be overly organized, since it was difficult to see how much full-time labour would actually be required.

The list of the ministry’s shortcomings is much shorter. It had studied prices extensively and instituted controls on the major products at the outset. But Murray is correct that the ministry had not taken into account sufficiently what would have to be done after the first few months. It further had not worked out a plan for profits and wages, despite the fact that this had been a crucial concern to farmers for years. Murray is also correct that insufficient attention was paid to providing animal feed, a criticism that has to be shared with Food (Defence Plans), since an important aspect of the problem was a lack of shipping space.

Still, overall, the record is quite positive. Murray states he was amazed at ‘the speed and efficiency with which the whole [agricultural] organization started to work’. His amazement can be attributed to the preparatory work ministry officials and others had been able to accomplish beforehand.

Food (Defence Plans’) record is equally impressive. The organizational framework and duties at the various levels—headquarters,

49 Murray, Agriculture, 326. 50 Hammond, Food, i. 47.
divisional, and local—had been worked out. Food had been reserved. The evacuation and commodity control schemes, with outside assistance, had been readied for execution. Transportation and storage questions had been addressed. Plans for rationing were well advanced, though the department’s delay in issuing permits to retailers and in determining more readily those eligible for rationing probably could have been avoided. But the department had made arrangements to earmark food for the services, including the Territorials when mobilized, and for supplying ship personnel at sea. It had further begun to work out procedures for resolving jurisdictional conflicts that might arise between it and the Agriculture ministry in time of war.

As with Agriculture, the list of negatives for Food (Defence Plans) is relatively short. Despite considerable time and effort, the department only partially dealt with controlling prices, profits, and wages, though part of the problem was that to be effective controls had to be put into effect across the economy. Moreover, in spite of a promising start, overseas trade procedures, such as arrangements for bulk purchases and contracts, had not been completed at the war’s beginning, even though the nations involved accepted the benefits of continuing existing trade patterns. Finally, and in accord with Hammond, the department can be criticized for not having developed a true food policy. As we have noted earlier, this oversight is not as crucial as it might have been, since Food (Defence Plans) was working on a number of issues that together actually constituted a policy. But it did take nearly a year into the war until one was formulated. Whether this problem was a true hindrance to officials who were preparing the food sector for war might well be debated; however, it cannot be denied that Britain benefited from what these officials had achieved. It should also be noted that the key leaders—Elliot, Morrison, French, and Fergusson, and to an extent Addison and Gilmour—performed yeoman service in seeing the effort through. In this light it is appropriate to quote from Morrison’s retrospective assessment to the House of Commons in October 1939. ‘In most cases’, he said, ‘detailed planning had been carried about as far as was practicable under peacetime conditions.’ Although he was speaking about the commodity control schemes, his statement can be enlarged to encompass most aspects of food control.

51 FS 48, 31 Mar. 1939, CAB 16/158, PRO.
52 352 HC Deb., 1938–9, col. 394, 18 Oct. 1939.
CHAPTER FIVE

The Influence of the Agricultural Lobbies

Effective cooperation [will produce] . . . reasonable prices for the farmer and adequate supplies for the public.

Robert Boothby

In the run-up to World War II we have catalogued a number of factors that influenced the government’s preparations in food and agriculture, including Treasury policy, unemployment, and rearmament as well as parliament’s watchdog role. But we have not examined in any detail the role of the various lobby groups. In this instance, agriculture lobbies rather than food associations will be emphasized, primarily because of the different relationship each sector had with the government. Although both had direct access to governmental departments, the tie between Food (Defence Plans) and the food industry seems to have been based on cooperation, while that between the Agriculture ministry and the farming community was much more fragile and at times antagonistic. The reason is related to the economic conditions of the time. Although both industries had felt the impact of the Depression, as the economy began to recover, food, too, had rebounded, but agriculture for the most part had not. The result had been continuing governmental involvement in the agricultural sector, and more complaints from farmers, while the food trades did better, and in good capitalist fashion were left pretty much to their own devices. Therefore, whereas relations between the government and the food sector in preparing for war required coming to grips with numerous details, it was relatively straightforward, that between the government and agriculture was more complex and deserves separate treatment.

The focus will be on four agricultural lobby groups: the National Farmers’ Union, Central Landowners’ Association, National Union of
Agricultural Workers, and Women’s Institutes. We will look first at the organization, programme, and activities of each and then at their relationship to the government’s preparations for war. We will also discuss briefly other groups, including the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, the Royal Agricultural Society of England, the Agricultural Economics Society, and the loosely organized Farmers’ Club and their concerns about defence matters. As might be expected, all the groups had interests that transcended rearmament. Somewhat surprisingly, however, in many instances, their interests were not confined solely to agriculture, but also to other economic and social concerns of the period.

By far the most influential group in relation to the government was the National Farmers’ Union. Although it had had precedents, it was founded in 1908 in Lincolnshire by a Scot, Colin Campbell. Its members at first consisted primarily of tenant farmers, but the property revolution after World War I, which resulted in three and a half times more independent farmers than before the war, brought about a huge increase in membership, from 20,000 in 1913 to around 100,000 in 1921. By the 1930s, it had risen further to approximately 125,000.

Such a considerable group—it represented more than half of the farmers—required a considerable organization to staff it. Its headquarters was located at Bedford Square in London, and it had a Council which met monthly and eighteen committees with between seven and twelve persons per committee. The committees were set up to report on products, such as cereals and livestock, or on activities, such as commerce, education, and parliament, press, and publicity. It even had a separate committee for Wales. At the head of the organization was a president, who usually served for one year. In 1936, when Dorman-Smith, the future Minister of Agriculture, became president, however, he served for two years. The president for 1938 was George Gibbard and for 1939–40 Thomas Peacock. Peacock’s two years as president also broke with precedent, but in this case the start of the war was the main reason. Anchoring the organization was its long-time secretary, Cleveland Fyfe.


2 National Farmers’ Union (NFU), Minutes of Council Meetings, 1935, Institute of Agricultural History (IAH).
Like practically all lobby groups the National Farmers’ Union had its own publications. Its official organ was the *NFU Record*, which was published monthly, and ran to twenty-two pages per issue. It included a monthly section on NFU activities, reports of Council meetings, and agricultural measures under consideration in the House of Commons. Each issue further contained a range of articles and featured a monthly column by James Wyllie, who commented on issues of interest to farmers. The NFU also published a *Yearbook*, which was primarily a reference of the year’s activities, though it contained several articles as well.

The policies of the NFU, and of its counterparts in Scotland and Northern Ireland, had evolved during the inter-war period. In the 1920s they had become the major spokespersons for farmers, but they still seemed insecure. They were contemptuous toward what they considered competitive organizations. They brooked no criticism of their policies and gave the impression of always being right. And they were concerned only with agricultural interests in the narrow sense.

Examples of this type of thinking continued into the 1930s, but NFU thinking began to moderate. Nevertheless, it still treated other groups, such as the Council for the Preservation of Rural England and the Women’s Institutes, with unnecessary disdain. When the Council invited the NFU, for example, to become a participating member of its organization, the NFU was unwilling to do so. When the Women’s Institutes asked the NFU to attend one of its meetings, the latter decided not to send a representative. But at the same time the NFU did begin to develop better, though hardly cordial, relations with the farm trade unions, and its relationship with the landowner organization, the Central Landowners’ Association, became quite close, although the two never merged.

Moreover, the Union’s policies became less self-righteous and less self-serving. It continued to advocate higher tariffs and restrictions on

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5 *NFU Record*, British Library (BL), and *NFU Yearbook*, IAH.
3 [NFU], Meeting of the General Purposes Committee, 18 May 1938, AD1/NFU 25, IAH.
6 *NFU Record*, ‘Notes of the Month’, Oct. 1938, 6, and Cyclo Q 305/9, Report of Parliamentary, Press and Publicity Committee, 15 Nov. 1938, NFU Minutes, IAH.
imports to help prop up domestic agriculture, but it did create links with foreign producers, especially from the Dominions. It also continued to advocate higher prices for farm goods, but it now stressed profitability for farmers so that they, too, could achieve a better standard of living. And while the NFU still did not show much concern for the public as consumers, it was at least starting to think in broader terms.

Its relationship with the government had also undergone an evolution. In the 1920s it had consulted with the Agriculture ministry and had pushed for the adoption of its ideas in parliament, but with limited effect. During the next decade, however, the government desired NFU assistance. This was basically for two reasons: to keep the demands of the increasingly powerful Union in bounds, and to gain the support of farmers as the government attempted to deal with the Depression and preparations for war. Consequently, the government relied on the NFU to help out in a number of ways, including providing agricultural statistics to the ministry and selecting candidates for the marketing boards and commissions. The government even went so far as to solicit NFU advice on matters in which the two disagreed, such as tariff policy.

Evidence of the government’s willingness to accede to the NFU a privileged position is abundant. In March 1935 an NFU delegation met with Agriculture minister Elliot to discuss concerns. In January 1936 the Duke of Kent was the honoured guest at the NFU’s annual dinner. Although his attendance was not necessarily political, it symbolized the organization’s increased stature. Later in the year NFU representatives met with Prime Minister Baldwin, who followed up the meeting with a letter assuring them of his ‘desire to provide for the welfare of the agriculture industry’. He also assured them that Elliot would be ‘in constant touch with the leaders of the Union’. At the NFU annual dinner in January 1937 Neville Chamberlain, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, was the featured speaker.

By this time governmental and NFU thinking were becoming intertwined, particularly as rearmament took centre stage. The NFU’s first published reference to defence was in the April 1936 issue of the *NFU*.

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Record. As always, the Union linked its concerns, grievances, and rightness of cause to the welfare of the nation. The article stated:

Since the scrapping of the Corn Production Acts [of 1921], successive Governments have elected to treat the question of agricultural policy as a matter of secondary importance. The economic crisis of 1930 established their mistake . . . . The nation is now face to face with their error of judgement from the standpoint of national security. Food production has been neglected in common with the needs of the Navy, Army and Air Force . . . . In such circumstances, it is plain that the position of the Ministry of Agriculture automatically becomes as important as that of the Admiralty, the War Office or the Air Ministry.10

From this point on, the NFU pushed its position. Although the Union contended it was neutral politically, everyone knew it favoured the Conservatives, and it saw the international situation as an opportunity to get what it wanted—better prices, better conditions, more production, more protection in the face of overseas competition. So long as the Treasury was dictating policy, the NFU could not achieve all of these objectives, but it could make inroads, and make inroads it did. Both the Agriculture acts of 1937 and 1939 bore the NFU stamp of approval as well as being tied to defence considerations.

The membership appreciated what the national organization was attempting to do.11 While the NFU continued to offer its services to the government on food questions related to war, it also wanted to use its influence to solve long-term problems in the industry. Although increased home production was the dominant note, it further desired, among other things, an adequate labour supply, access to machinery and fertilizers, supplies of fuel, and crop insurance. With the appointment of Dorman-Smith as Minister of Agriculture in January 1939, followed by constant consultation between the NFU and the ministry, these objectives began to seem within reach.

To be sure, NFU branches still expressed concern that they did not know what was happening.12 But President Peacock reassured them on

12 Cyclo R 80/1, Mr Thomas Peacock, ‘Food Production in Time of War’, 20 Apr. 1939, ADt/NFU 25, IAH, and [NFU], Minutes of General Purposes Committee, 17 May 1939, ADt/NFU 25, IAH.
20 April that his talks with the ministry, though ‘necessarily of a highly confidential nature’, had been exceedingly helpful. He went on to state, ‘I am thoroughly satisfied that, should an emergency, unhappily, arise the Ministry will be in a position to put their [sic] plans into operation without a moment’s loss of time’. He also pointed out that the NFU would be intimately involved in the wartime effort. Yet he ended by saying that ‘if hostilities should break out’, NFU activities would probably have to be directed from an alternative location. In July the Union duly purchased a suitable place thirty miles outside London for just such a contingency.

At the same time the NFU was not pleased with the government’s plans in the food sector and with what it conceived of as too much governmental concern over questions of nutrition. Regarding plans, the problem was not so much what Food (Defence Plans) was doing as it was the Union’s fear it was not being told what Food (Defence Plans) was doing. In March 1939 French went before the NFU Council and ‘gave them a short address’ and answered questions to allay its concerns. French’s description of food control measures did help, though it did not completely put to rest NFU suspicions. Regarding nutrition, Dorman-Smith, while president, echoed the Union’s widespread scepticism toward what he described ‘as a new science and as yet far from being an exact one’. Nevertheless, in February 1939 the NFU agreed to send delegates to a National Nutrition Conference.

The NFU’s privileged position toward the government was replicated by its counterparts in Scotland and Northern Ireland, the National Farmers’ Union of Scotland and the Ulster Farmers’ Union. In Scotland the Union had close relations with the country’s Department of Agriculture, helping it make appointments, holding public meetings to explain the ramifications of the nation’s farm policy, and lobbying on local issues, such as when egg, oats, and barley prices fell in 1937. In the autumn of 1938 the Scottish NFU further consolidated its position by amalgamating with the Scottish Chamber of Agriculture, which represented many of the country’s large landholders. This move

13 Cyclo Q 393/4, Report of Parliamentary, Press and Publicity Committee, 17 May 1939, NFU Minutes, IAH, and Cyclo R 54/3, Minutes of Council, 16 Mar. 1939, NFU Minutes, IAH.
15 James A. Symon, Scottish Farming Past and Present (Edinburgh, 1958), 235–7; R. Morison Ireland to P. R. Laird, Department of Agriculture for Scotland, 6 Jan. 1939, AF 43/124, SRO; and MAF, ‘The Position of the Poultry Industry’, 5 Feb. 1937, AF 46/277, SRO.
reflected the nature of Scottish society, but it also had the obvious advantage of allowing the agricultural sector to speak with one voice on policy matters.

In Northern Ireland the Ulster Farmers’ Union was equally strong. In fact, the area’s Ministry of Agriculture seldom made a decision without UFU approval. Not only did it nominate farmers for boards and commissions, the ministry kept the Union informed about what was happening in terms of Britain’s agricultural policy, and in particular of anticipated wartime measures. The UFU, in turn, kept its members informed through a monthly Farmers’ Journal. When the war broke out it was therefore not surprising to see the Union become the right hand of the ministry in administering the increased production campaign throughout the region’s six counties.

To coordinate the policies of the three unions the leaders of the English and Welsh organization invited the other two to form a committee to discuss common problems. The Scots and Northern Irish accepted, and in June 1936 they held their first meeting in London. The committee consisted of three top leaders from each union, and they met every fourth month at each of the three countries in turn. The topics discussed increasingly dealt with war-related subjects, and the information exchanged helped the representatives understand each others’ concerns and the role the unions would be expected to play in time of war.

Still, one might contend that the farmers’ unions had not yet escaped entirely from pursuing their own self-interest to the detriment of other interests. They repeatedly expressed their willingness to serve the nation in wartime, but only within the framework of what they conceived of as being good for the farmer. In their view, overseas trade should be governed by the needs of farmers at home no matter what the consequences—and the cost!—to consumers might be. Increased domestic production was to be paramount, nutritional considerations secondary. An adequate labour supply for agriculture should always receive the highest priority, although at times other sectors of the economy might be even more critical. As with most lobby groups, the

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16 Ulster Farmers’ Union (UFU), Executive Committee Minutes, 24 Nov. 1936, D1051/13/A/A/3, PRONI; 25 Aug. 1938, D1050/13/A/A/4, PRONI; and Special Meeting, Executive Committee, 9 Sept. 1939, D1051/13/A/A/4, PRONI.
17 Joint Coordinating Committee, First Meeting, 11 June 1936, AD1/NFU 27, IAH; and Fourth Meeting, 30 June 1937, AD1/NFU 27, IAH.
farmers’ unions thus tended to forget that their opinion as to what was good for the farmer was not necessarily good for the nation.

Like the National Farmers’ Union, the second major agricultural lobby, the Central Landowners’ Association, supported agricultural interests, but there were differences between the two groups. The CLA had begun in 1907 in Lincolnshire, but the government’s death duties and other taxes had devastated the organization after World War I. Nevertheless, it had survived. It had continued because, despite the break-up of numerous estates, some large landowners remained in farming, and because the membership was broadened to include smaller landowners. This second factor allowed the Association to grow steadily from its nadir of 1,162 members in 1919 to 12,329 in 1939 with forty-five branches throughout England and Wales.

Even so, the organization retained a large landowner orientation. Its leading members were lords, Lord Cranworth, Lord Hastings, and Lord Phillimore, among others, and the key person throughout most of the period was Lord Bledisloe, who was a founding member and had served as president in 1921–2. Therefore, while the CLA promoted agriculture, its concerns always had a landowner cast to them.

The Association’s organization consisted of a sixty-person Council, which met quarterly, and a thirty-person Executive Committee, which met every month. Like most pressure groups, these two bodies dealt with business matters and acted on resolutions passed by the CLA branches. It was less structured, however, than the NFU, since it had only two standing committees—publicity and propaganda and finance. But it did appoint special ad hoc committees from time to time, and in February 1937 it formed a joint standing committee with the National Farmers’ Union ‘to strengthen the presentation of the agricultural case’. Consequently, the positions advocated by the two groups were virtually the same, although the CLA continued to represent landowner interests and the NFU those of owner-occupiers and tenant farmers. The only time they had a true dispute was during the summer of 1938, when the CLA called for a governmental ‘investigation’ into increasing domestic production immediately for defence purposes. The NFU, while in agreement with the idea, thought the landowners’ proposal was too time consuming and too narrowly conceived. It

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19 [CLA], SP1/39–40, IAH, and [CLA], Executive Committee Minutes, 4 Feb. 1937, CLA AD1/30, IAH.
advocated pushing for a statement on agricultural policy as a whole.\textsuperscript{20} But in the end the CLA backed down and went along with the Union’s desire not to have an inquiry at that time.

To keep its members informed, the CLA published a \textit{Journal of the Central Landowners’ Association} on a quarterly basis.\textsuperscript{21} Although it contained no editorials, each issue featured one or two articles on farm problems. The rest of the \textit{Journal} was devoted to Association business and concerns, such as reports on Council and Executive Committee meetings and sections on agricultural measures before parliament and on pertinent matters before the courts. It also included a section on new books.

As stated, the Association’s policies largely coincided with those of the NFU, though slanted toward large landowner preferences.\textsuperscript{22} For example, while advocating the general proposition of ‘a reasonable margin of profit over cost of production’, the CLA was also greatly concerned about tithes, which was a rent charged to landowners, death duties on agricultural land, and other taxes. In the case of tithes, the government was willing to make changes, but on the other taxes it held firm. The Association also said it was concerned about the plight of rural workers, but it did not favour abolishing tied cottages and wanted unemployment insurance to cover only full-time labourers. Needless to say, it violently opposed nationalization of the land, which was advocated by certain individuals, such as Charles Orwin and Sir Daniel Hall, and by the Labour Party. The Association’s contention was that the landlord–tenant system was necessary because landlords served as a ‘buffer’ in looking after their tenants.

The CLA began discussing defence issues as early as 1936.\textsuperscript{23} They were first brought up at an Executive Committee meeting in June in the form of food storage and increased domestic production, and the same issues duly appeared in several places in the September issue of the \textit{Journal}. In November Mr G. T. Hutchinson drew attention to ‘the unsatisfactory methods’ being used by Air Ministry officials to acquire aerodrome sites, and Lord Bledisloe regretted that the higher wages
being paid by defence-related manufacturers was having a serious effect on ‘the local supply of agricultural labour’. During 1937 and 1938 these concerns, and others, continued to be brought up at Council and Executive Committee meetings. After the September crisis agriculture and defence—and the unfavourable condition of farmers—were the main topics of discussion.24

Yet, in relation to the government, the CLA clearly was following the lead of the National Farmers’ Union.25 In February 1939 the Association was pleased to present the landowners’ case directly to the government as part of Minister Dorman-Smith’s discussions with agriculture groups, and in March a CLA delegation even met with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon, about a remission of death duties. Though Simon indicated that for tax reasons he could not grant such a proposal, he might be able to give them some relief ‘by administrative means’. But the government was more concerned about the NFU, and the needs of the nation in general, than it was the CLA. In May, when the ploughing up campaign was announced and the Agriculture bill passed, the farmers’ union received the main credit, and the landowners’ association was considered of only secondary importance. What this situation signified was that during the inter-war period the NFU had become agriculture’s main spokesperson, and discussions now centred in the House of Commons. The landowners still wielded some power and had access to parliament, but the House of Lords, which had once been the primary arena for comments on agricultural policy, had now been relegated to a subsidiary role. To the credit of the Central Landowners’ Association leadership, while they might not like it, they seemed to understand what had happened. Also to the credit of the Association, as one might expect, when the war broke out, it moved its headquarters out of London and wholeheartedly gave its support to the government.26

The third of the major agricultural lobby groups—the trade union movement—suffered from a number of severe handicaps.27 One was that large segments of Britain, including the Conservative Party,

24 [CLA], Quarterly Meeting of the Council, 17 Nov. 1938, CLA AD1/11, IAH.
25 [CLA], Executive Committee Meeting, 2 Feb. 1939, CLA AD1/31, IAH, and 23 Mar. 1939, CLA AD1/31, IAH.
26 [CLA], Executive Committee Meeting, 30 Nov. 1939, CLA AD1/31, IAH.
considered trade unions to be too radical, too anti-capitalist, to be trusted. Another was that many agricultural labourers, for reasons of small numbers per farm and trust in their employers, preferred not to join. Although exact figures are difficult to obtain, Alan Armstrong estimates that only 8 per cent of the workers opted to become members. Finally, the rural trade unions were split among themselves. In England and Wales there were two unions, the National Union of Agricultural Workers and the agriculture branch of the Transport and General Workers’ Union, plus two more for Scotland and Northern Ireland. While they agreed on most issues, their fragmented nature obviously limited their effectiveness.

The most important group was the National Union of Agricultural Workers. It had had precedents as early as 1872, but had assumed its current form in 1919 as an affiliate of the Trade Union Congress. At war’s end, it claimed a large constituency of 170,000 members, but that number soon evaporated in the post-war setting and hovered around 25,000 until the mid-1930s, when it began to rise. By 1939 it had reached 37,225 and was organized into 1,200 branches. Sixteen overworked organizers tried to maintain contact with the branches and help them with their problems.

Over the years the workers had been represented by a series of colourful leaders from Joseph Arch through Sir George Edwards. Edwin Gooch, a newspaperman out of Norfolk and the NUAW president during the 1930s, was less colourful, but quite effective in keeping the organization going. He was also quite effective in balancing its two main factions: those who wanted to improve the workers’ lot within the capitalist framework, and those who desired a more radical approach. Brother Gooch, Secretary Will Holmes, and Tom Williams, one of the parliamentary leaders, among others, were assisted in their endeavours by the publication of the Union’s sixteen-page monthly journal, *The Land Worker*. What it lacked in presentation, it made up for in content. Its features and editorials were sprightly written, its

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29 *The Land Worker* (LW), IAH.
illustrations eye-catching, and its information helpful to members and prospective recruits alike. Though it, and the entire Union organization, were run on the proverbial shoestring, there is no doubt that they represented as well as tried to shape the views of their constituency.

The NUAW’s rival, the agriculture branch of the Transport and General Workers’ Union, was less dynamic, though its secretary, George Dallas, was an efficient and well-respected leader.\textsuperscript{30} It numbered approximately 15,000 workers, and its main strength was in the eastern counties and northern Wales with some support in the north. While the two groups saw eye-to-eye in most cases, their long-time separate identities made it difficult for them to consolidate their efforts.

The Transport and General Workers’ Union also controlled the agricultural trade unions in Scotland and Northern Ireland. In Scotland it was called the Scottish Farm Servants’ Union and was headed by the dynamic Joe Duncan.\textsuperscript{31} It numbered about 4,000 workers. In Northern Ireland it was named the rural workers’ section of the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers’ Union, and the region’s secretary was R. McClurg. In June 1938 its membership was 567. Both unions were concerned about what was happening in Britain as a whole, but both were also concerned about local matters, such as establishing agricultural wages boards similar to those in England and Wales. The boards, which were to fix minimum wages, became a reality in Scotland in 1937 and in Northern Ireland in 1938. (It was particularly galling to the Northern Irish that the Free State had set up a wages board two years earlier in 1936.)

The key to the rural trade unions was relationships—towards each other, the political parties, the government, and other agriculture-related groups. Towards each other, they got along well enough. They sat together on a number of wages boards, and all four unions were represented at their meeting with Minister of Agriculture Dorman-Smith on 23 February 1939.\textsuperscript{32} The level of cooperation even reached the point that during the year the NUAW, though rejecting amalgamation,
agreed to look into ‘dividing’ Great Britain into sections with the Transport Union. According to the proposal the agriculture branch of the Transport Union was to have the ‘prescriptive right’ to organize Scotland, Northern Ireland, North Wales, and Essex, Suffolk, and Cambridgeshire. All other areas of England and South Wales would be under the National Union of Agricultural Workers. By late summer they were close to an agreement, but it did not come into being because of the war.

Towards the political parties, the trade unions’ relationships were important in two respects. For one thing, it was no surprise that they did not particularly like the Conservatives and were closely linked to Labour; though prior to the 1920s the NUAW had had a Liberal bent. In the other respect, it was significant what the agricultural unions did not do. The NUAW might sing ‘The Red Flag’ at its biennial conferences, but it refused to support the British Communist Party and to send delegates to the Congress of Peace and Friendship with the USSR. Nor did the unions participate in the hunger marches, which they conceived to be communist-inspired. In other words, there were organizations the agricultural trade unions would not support, even though they sympathized with some of their leftist aims.

Toward the government, the trade unions were cautious. They did not especially like the government, but they realized its help was essential to get what they wanted. They therefore appeared before parliamentary committees and served on wages boards, and Gooch was a member of a Rural Housing Committee set up by the government. But the union disliked Elliot and Morrison, whom they rightly perceived as supporting farmer interests at the expense of workers. An indication of the NUAW’s dissatisfaction is recorded in the September 1936 issue of the Land Worker. In an article entitled ‘What Has Elliot Done?’ Gooch responded to Elliot’s contention that ‘the [Government’s] policy had provided a decent living for people on the land’ with a resounding no. Gooch’s rejoinder was as follows:

33 Self and Storing, State and the Farmer, 184, and [NUAW], 29 Nov. 1935, NUAW B/I/8, IAH.
34 [NUAW], 8–9 May 1936, NUAW B/VI/7, IAH; [NUAW], Minutes of Executive Committee, 17 Jan. 1936, NUAW B/I/8, IAH; [NUAW], Minutes of Executive Committee, 22 Oct. 1937, NUAW B/I/9, IAH; and Ian MacDougall, Voices from the Hunger Marches: Personal Recollections by Scottish Hunger Marchers of the 1920s and 1930s (Edinburgh, 1990), 1–7.
I sum up the results of the Government’s policy thus: dissatisfied farmers (I know that’s true); poorly-paid labourers (and that’s true); men leaving the land (this cannot be disputed); thousands of people in Britain without sufficient food or the right kind of food (eminent medical men say this is so). And I add that assessed on these grounds the Government’s policy has been a miserable failure.36

Still, the Union was relatively pleased with the appointment of Dorman-Smith, a farmer, as Minister of Agriculture in January 1939. But it was displeased that workers’ representatives had not been included in the government’s proposed talks with farm groups.37 When the government ‘recanted’ and agreed to meet with the four unions on 23 February the latter were naturally gratified. They were disappointed, however, with the outcome. According to the minutes of the NUAW Executive Committee, Dorman-Smith started the meeting by stating ‘he had little to say but wanted the deputation’s views’. After five of the representatives had spoken, ‘the deputation was thanked for its attendance, and promised that if necessary the Minister would meet the representatives again’. Nevertheless, despite the cavalier attitude of the minister, formal channels between the two parties were open, and both the government and the trade unions benefited from their ongoing relationship when the war commenced.

Towards other agricultural lobbies, the trade unions were equally cautious.38 They conceded there was ‘room for cooperation’ with the National Farmers’ Union and the Central Landowners’ Association, but they were also aware of the superior attitude farmers and landowners exhibited toward ‘the lesser, contaminated breeds below’. The trade unions were also cautious about women becoming part of the organized, rural workforce. Although the NUAW had a woman, Ruth Uzzell of Warwickshire, on its Executive Committee, it was a token appointment. When the Women’s Institutes on several occasions approached the Executive about having female representatives on wages boards, the NUAW replied that while it was always ready to help women, it supported having them on boards only if they had sufficient members in the Union, which they did not. On the other hand, a

36 LW, ‘What Has Elliot Done?’, Sept. 1936, 10.
37 [NUAW], Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 20 Jan. 1939 and 17 Feb. 1939, NUAW B/I/9, IAH.
38 LW, ‘Step Down’, Feb. 1937, 8; [NUAW], 17 Feb. 1939, NUAW B/I/9, IAH; LW, ‘The Women’s Institutes’, July 1939, 2; and [NUAW], Minutes of Organising and Political Sub-Committee, Dec. 1939, NUAW B/III/6, IAH.
July 1939 article in the *Land Worker* described the organization and interests of the Women’s Institutes in a favourable light. Thus, the unions were willing to work with groups it did not particularly like.

What then were the unions’ policies? What did they want? As might be expected, they backed the usual trade union demands—better pay (usually with a definite figure); better conditions, including a forty-eight-hour week, a day off each week, and a paid week’s holiday; and better benefits. Some of these demands were achieved—unemployment insurance in 1936; an annual holiday, though split into two three-day periods, with pay in 1938; and an increased minimum wage in 1939. But the other demands were not met. The unions had additional objectives, which we might call quality of life issues, but they were even more difficult to obtain. They included the abolition of tied cottages, modernization of existing dwellings or new ones (the government was making a modest effort in this area), better schools for children, and opportunities for workers ‘to take part in the public life of the [rural] community’. A final demand was nationalization of the land, though this aspect of their programme was not emphasized as prominently as the bread-and-butter issues.

Regarding food and defence, the *Land Worker* mentioned governmental measures as early as August 1936, but it was not brought up in the NUAW Executive Committee until December 1937. By the time of the biennial conference in May 1938, however, it was the main topic of discussion, and Gooch devoted his entire presidential address to the possibility of war. His main complaint was that labour was not being informed. When is the defence minister, he asked, ‘going to call together farmers and workers in an endeavour to strengthen the weakest link in our chain of defence—the food link?’ He said he realized the government had plans for rationing and had bought reserves of food, but these measures were not enough. What was needed was to expand domestic agriculture as rapidly as possible, but this step the government had failed to take. While he stopped short of saying workers should fight for the country, he said ‘we must fight at all costs to preserve for ourselves the liberties we now enjoy’. The most significant point in the speech was Gooch’s implication that farmers and workers must join hands

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40 LW, ‘Food in Wartime’, Aug. 1936, 6; [NUAW], Minutes of Meeting of the Executive Committee, 17 Dec. 1937, NUAW B/I/9, IAH; LW, Mar. 1938, 10; and [NUAW], 6 May 1938, NUAW B/VI/7, IAH.
because there was an even greater menace lurking beyond Britain's shores. He still thought the outstanding world problems could be solved, though only by a new government. But farmers and workers must come together just as employers and workers were coming together in the industrial sector to rearm the nation.

Yet the trade union movement as a whole had difficulty accepting the probability of war and their participation in it. In May 1939 the Union's General Council condemned the compulsory Military Training Bill, although it reiterated its support of voluntary military service and wanted to continue consultations with the government on mobilizing labour in case of war.

The labour question obviously affected farm workers, and the agricultural unions, as in other industries, attempted to protect its interests. They suggested additional sources of labour, such as men over 45 years of age and others who could work but not serve in the military, through the use of existing Labour Exchanges. But they could not bring themselves to accept women workers, except for certain types of work and certainly not as tractor drivers. In a July 1939 editorial in the *Land Worker*, they demonstrated their frustration in having women as part of the regular workforce. The editorial was particularly concerned about the possible role of the Women's Institutes and their association with the Women's Land Army. The editorial began, ‘The Hon. Mrs. This, the Lady That, and the Countess of Something Else are on the warpath again. The Women’s Land Army is here, and they have got their old jobs back [from the First World War]—of bossing people, and of seeing that farmers find a way out of their labour shortage without having to pay better wages.’ Still, by 25 August, while continuing to oppose a large influx of women workers on the ground that they would depress wages, the Union was willing to modify its stand to take into account the existing emergency. Also, by this time, the Union was appointing representatives to serve on the War Agricultural Executive Committees, which were to oversee domestic production and other measures at the local level. Therefore, despite misgivings, the agricultural trade unions were positioning themselves to become heavily involved in the war effort.

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41 [NUAW], Minutes of Meeting of the Executive Committee, 19 May 1939, NUAW B/1/9, IAH.
42 LW, ‘A New Reserve’, June 1939, 1; and, ‘Watch Those Women’, July 1939, 1; [NUAW], Minutes of Meeting of the Executive Committee, 23 June 1939 and 28 Aug. 1939, NUAW B/1/9, IAH.
The fourth major agricultural group—the Women’s Institutes—did not back any political party, but they still had a political agenda and had a significant impact on rural Britain. The Institutes—or more correctly the National Federation of Women’s Institutes—had been founded in 1915 in Anglesey, an offshoot of the first Women’s Institute in Canada. From the beginning they had an international flavour and had contacts around the globe. They had assumed an active role during World War I, establishing market stalls with fresh fruits and vegetables in towns and villages, promoting home gardening and canning, and helping with hospital and war-related work. After the war, the organization continued to flourish. Their avowed goal was to break down the isolation of women in rural areas, but as Nicola Tyrer has put it, they built much more: ‘self-confidence, self-expression, citizenship, and self-improvement’. By the late 1930s they had a membership of approximately 328,000 divided into 5,740 institutes in England and Wales, 55,000 and 1,027 institutes in Scotland, and over 1,000 and 30 institutes in Northern Ireland. Although dependent on their many local institutes, they had a headquarters in London and an Executive Committee that met every month. The central organization had twelve Sub-Committees that focused on their administrative and business operations and on their activities, such as drama, education, and handicrafts. They were financed primarily by membership dues, but also applied for and received some government grants.

They further had a monthly journal, Home & Country, which had a circulation of 68,186 in December 1936. Its sixty pages included a variety of topics to keep their members informed: notes from headquarters, correspondence, notes of activities, articles, current events, films to see, a children’s page, news of the County Federations, letters from London. In 1939 it was cut in size to forty pages and then cut further in 1940 owing to the war.

Far and away the most important person was Lady Denman, who was the Institutes’ director between 1917 and 1945. Born Gertrude Pearson, she was of a Yorkshire background, and her father was a

44 Pedley, Labour on the Land, 147, Symon, Scottish Farming, 238, and Mrs Irene A. Sproule to author, 8 Nov. 2000.
45 Home & Country (H & C), BL.
highly successful contractor with worldwide connections. In 1903 she married Lord Thomas Denman, and they had two children, a son and a daughter. She had Liberal Party and feminist leanings, but did not advocate militancy, and was adamant about keeping the Institutes non-partisan politically and non-sectarian. She was well connected to Britain’s political establishment, who sought her advice and assistance on numerous matters. Although considered somewhat formidable by those who did not know her, those who did admired her quick mind, objective outlook, and common-sense approach to problems. She was also fortunate to have able and loyal associates, including, among others, Grace Hadow, Frances Farrer, and Inez Jenkins. Together they forged the Women’s Institutes into an impressive enterprise.

Their objectives were ‘to take part in rural life and development’ and ‘to break down rural and village isolation’.47 The ‘breaking down’ and ‘developing’ had both political and social connotations. It meant being concerned about improving village water supplies and obtaining electricity, better housing, and better health and nutrition. It further meant self-improvement in the form of lectures, training courses, demonstrations, and music and drama groups. But it also meant getting together at least once a month to discuss and converse about common concerns. These meetings consisted of everything from lectures on India to demonstrations on glove making and household repairs to discussions about the importance of milk for children, always followed by a cup of tea. Mrs Tom Cooper, a farmer’s wife from Essex, described her feelings as follows: ‘Immediately [when] I mention the W.I., the farmers think a lot of gossipy women . . . They don’t understand what it means to us. We—all the women in the village—feel frightfully bound-in at times’.

What the Women’s Institutes accomplished was to give rural women the confidence to become involved in the community and to advocate changes. At times they got what they wanted, at times not, but they were listened to at local and county levels and at the national level as well.48 What they did not accomplish was to attract many younger


women, those in the 20–30 age bracket, into the organization. Nor, despite their democratic procedures, were they always democratic. More often than not, though understandably, they elected the wife of a large landowner or local minister to serve as president. In other words, the trade unions’ depiction of the leaders of Women’s Institutes assuming superior airs had some basis in fact.

The Institutes did not become especially interested in the relationship between food and defence matters until the late 1930s. During 1936–7, most printed comments about the relationship were indirect.\(^{49}\) In April 1936 *Home & Country* discussed ‘Defence at Home’, but the article dealt more with military rearmament than with measures at home, and in May an article on ‘Food and the Nation’ focused on nutrition rather than war preparations. In July 1937 the Executive Committee sent a letter to its branches to encourage agricultural production, but did not tie the concern directly to defence. In December, however, it did discuss national defence, though in terms of the military buying land unnecessarily to construct installations.

In 1938 the pace quickened, and the WIs became involved primarily in three areas. One was evacuations from the cities.\(^{50}\) Evacuations, of course, were associated with possible air raids, and air raid plans were under the purview of the Air Raid Precautions Department. But it soon became apparent that the Institutes would play a part, particularly in terms of finding accommodation for women and children. In May WI representatives started attending Air Raid department meetings. By September, when the Czech emergency began to reach crisis proportions, Air Raid Precautions officials were in constant contact with the Institutes’ headquarters, outlining ‘the help which might be required’.

After the crisis subsided the WI’s role was featured in an article entitled, ‘The NFWI and the Crisis’.\(^{51}\) The article began with Lady Denman extolling ‘the way in which so many Women’s Institute members, undaunted, tackled or helped to tackle the problem [of evacuations] at extremely short notice’. It went on to describe the activities of Frances

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\(^{51}\) *H & C*, ‘The NFWI and the Crisis’, Nov. 1938, 449.
Farrer, the general secretary, during those tension-filled days. On 24 September she was summoned to the Women’s Volunteer Services office in London and asked to provide a list of persons who could serve as liaison officers at locations in the countryside. Farrer not only provided a list, but formed ‘a flying squadron of six organizers to visit each of the counties’. By 1 October fourteen of the sixteen counties in the London evacuation area had been visited, some of them twice. As it turned out, the Women’s Institutes were involved only in one of several evacuations, but the removal of sixty children from the Bessborough Street Centre, Westminster, to Cambridge took place with a minimum of trouble, after which the children returned to London several days later. Also, in the aftermath it was clear that the main difficulty would be to provide housing for an extended period, and in February Minister of Health Elliot asked the WIs to prepare lists of available accommodation in case of an emergency. These lists were being compiled during the spring and summer of 1939.\(^5^2\)

The second area of Institute involvement was food production, and at its 1938 annual conference Minister of Agriculture Morrison stressed the importance of domestic agriculture in times of crisis.\(^5^3\) While the Institute was interested in increased grain, livestock, and other farm production, it was more concerned about ‘little’ but vital measures, such as home gardens and food preservation. This interest led to the formation of Producer Guilds in March 1939, and they were functioning in numerous counties by summertime. A letter from Kathleen Talbot of Berkhamsted demonstrates the possible difference that little things could make. She suggested

> that every WI member who has a garden should buy a small extra quantity of vegetable seeds or tubers this year, choosing those that can be bottled, dried or stored for use in the winter (principally peas, beans, carrots, onions and potatoes). The cost would be negligible, and the result might be invaluable, especially in those villages that were expected to receive refugees. And if we escape war, she noted, none of us will be worse for eating rather more vegetables than usual.\(^5^4\)

Another aspect of food production that the Women’s Institutes thought would make a difference was market stalls.\(^5^5\) They had been a

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52 HHD, ‘Women’s Volunteer Services for Civil Defence’, 5 June 1939, HH 50/51, SRO.
53 H & C, ‘Morrison Speech’, July 1938, 288; NFWI, Executive Committee Minutes, 8 Feb. 1939, 508; 8 Mar. 1939, 551; and 10 May 1939, 651.
successful enterprise during World War I, and the Executive Committee encouraged their being resurrected to provide access to fresh, though perishable, goods on a regular basis. The Committee’s encouragement paid off, for WI stalls again became a familiar sight after the war broke out.

The third area of WI involvement was the Women’s Land Army. Although not part of the Women’s Institutes, the two organizations were closely linked, since Lady Denman headed both. Sir Henry French of Food (Defence Plans) had been aware of the possibility of a WLA as early as November 1936, when he noted that steps ‘should be taken during peace with a view to the creation of a Women’s Land Army after the outbreak of hostilities’. In April 1938 Ministry of Agriculture officials decided to set up a women’s branch to deal with that element of the farm labour question. In May Lady Denman and others started to work out a detailed plan and to contact in confidence prospective chairpersons for each county. When Minister Dorman-Smith seemed to be procrastinating about appointing a headquarters staff and other matters in April 1939, Lady Denman threatened to resign. She got her way, as she often did, and the Ministry agreed to a staff headed by the Women’s Institutes’ Inez Jenkins. By June the Women’s Land Army was officially in business, and applications were being taken for young women to enroll in training classes. By September, at war’s outbreak, the WLA started functioning from its new administrative headquarters at Balcombe Place (Lady Denman’s home) south of London.

At this point the Women’s Land Army and the Women’s Institutes were ready to assist the nation during wartime. They had not had an influence on preparations in food and agriculture until quite late, but they had at least had an impact during 1938–9. At the same time, the WIs did not want to lose sight of their twin objectives of being ‘centres of activity for the educational and social life of country women’ and of improving life in rural Britain. But the Institutes also realized they had important war-related missions to perform, such as preparations for receiving city children in the villages, helping increase food production, and looking after members of the Women’s Land Army.

The impact of other agriculture-related groups on defence was much more limited than that of the National Farmers’ Union, Central

56 [MAF], Minute Sheet, 25 Nov. 1936, PRO; G. Huxley, Lady Denman, 151–8, and Tyrer, They Fought in the Fields, 16–17.
Landowners’ Association, National Union of Agricultural Workers, and Women’s Institutes. The well-connected Council for the Preservation of Rural England was one of the first conservation groups. It was disturbed about the sites being selected for airfields and munitions factories, and its concern prompted the Air Ministry to hire Professor Patrick Abercrombie, the Council’s president, as a consultant for the acquisition of sites. But that was about the extent of the CPRE’s interest in defence matters.

The influence of the Royal Agricultural Society for England was even less. Despite its scientific bent and well-respected journal, its activity in the inter-war years was restricted primarily to exhibiting animals at its annual show. To be sure, it supported defence in that it promoted agricultural research, and its journal published an occasional defence-related article, such as D. H. Robinson’s ‘Rye and its Possibilities in Time of War’, but it never played an active part in war preparations. The Agricultural Economics Society also supported a scientific approach to agriculture, and its membership included Charles Orwin, the outspoken advocate of nationalizing the land. But it mainly reacted to the agriculture–defence relationship by examining the ploughing up campaign and other issues rather than trying directly to influence the government’s actions.

A more important group was the Farmers’ Club. It was not organized to be a lobby, but to provide accommodation and a place for members to eat while in London. It also provided a forum for significant individuals to present their views on agricultural matters. In 1936, for instance, Sir John Orr talked about nutrition, and in December 1938 Dorman-Smith, a month before he became Minister of Agriculture, gave a paper (read by Cleveland Fyne) on the need for a long-term national policy for agriculture. His paper, which contained elements on defence in it, prompted M. R. S. Walters of Warwick to reply that he feared the government ‘had no policy for agriculture in wartime’.

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58 Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE), Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 26 May 1936, 26 June 1936, and 8 Mar. 1938, 3 CPRE AI/4, IAH.
60 The Farm Economist, 3 (1939–41).
While Walters’ criticism had little basis in fact, it did reflect the ongoing concern in the countryside. The Farmers’ Club even continued to provide an outlet for agricultural topics after the war began. The papers represented a rich variety of opinions, including addresses by ministers Dorman-Smith and William Morrison and by trade union leaders Tom Williams and Edwin Gooch.

Nevertheless, none of these more focused groups had the influence of the National Farmers’ Union, upon which the government increasingly depended during the 1930s. Then, with the onset of preparing for war, the NFU, along with the landowner, trade union, and Women’s Institutes, became even more influential as the government turned to them for help. Moreover, all of the groups, large and small, felt it important to inform their constituencies about what the government was doing and how these measures might well affect their daily lives. What the lobby groups failed to realize, however, was that the measures the government was undertaking in the name of defence would eventually lead to what all rural Britain desired. As Robert Boothby stated to Scottish farmers at a dinner in 1937, this meant ensuring ‘reasonable prices for the farmers and adequate supplies for the public’.62 This objective of a more prosperous countryside began in the 1930s, and even the deprivations of World War II did not arrest but accelerated its coming to fruition in the post-war years.

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62 Department of Agriculture (DA), ‘Summary of Speech by Robert Boothby . . .’, AF 43/123, SRO.
CHAPTER SIX

Awareness in the Countryside

A defence policy that ignores the importance of the ‘food front’ is seriously incomplete.

Eastern Daily Press

Rural Britain has long conjured up a number of contrasting images: the romantic ideal as contrasted with rural isolation; landscapes of breathtaking beauty over and against unbelievably squalid conditions; the leisurely life of the country squire as differentiated from the tied cottager’s meagre existence; a land of bountiful plenty as distinguished from a region playing a declining role in the lifeblood of the nation.¹

While all of these contrasts obviously fall short of the entire truth, each still has an element of truth about it, so that the people of Britain, depending on their viewpoint, held on to portions of them during the 1930s.

Nevertheless, whether one clung to the mythical ideal or accepted the harsh reality of rural life, conditions in the countryside were changing rapidly.² The main reason, as most of us are aware, was the impact of urban culture on the rural landscape. Part of this change was the result of the outmigration of town dwellers and pensioners who preferred life in the country or village to that in the cities. But part of it also was the result of technological changes, which brought people into closer contact whether they wanted to be or not. Few places in Britain were immune from the reach of technology.

These changes brought about an increased awareness of what was happening nationally and internationally as well as on the local scene. In this regard it is germane for us to ask three questions. One, what

¹ Howard Newby, The Deferential Worker: A Study of Farm Workers in East Anglia (London, 1977), 11; Charles S. Orwin, Speed the Plough (Harmondsworth, 1942), 71; and Raymond Williams, The Country and the City (New York, 1973), 297.

were the means by which the people living in rural areas were informed? Two, to what extent were they informed about the role they would play in case of war? And three, did the rural inhabitants in turn have any influence on the war-related procedures that were being worked out by the government during the last half of the 1930s? The answers to these questions will add another dimension to our understanding of the relationship among food, agriculture, and rearmament in the period before World War II.

With respect to the means of informing the rural population, although the variety of communications pale in comparison to what we have today, there were still numerous ways in which people became aware of what was happening. There was, of course, word of mouth. This took the form of talking to one another in local stores and pubs, in church or chapel, at schools or at meetings of rural organizations, such as those of farmers, landowners, workers, and Women’s Institutes that we discussed earlier. Then there were other organizations, including, among others, the British Legion, the Mothers’ Union, the Workers’ Education Association, and the Young Farmers’ Club, at which discussions undoubtedly involved political and economic matters as well as club concerns.3

But there were also other ways in which country folk were being informed or, on occasion, misinformed about the world in which they lived. The wireless was coming into widespread use. Radios were in over half of Britain’s homes by the mid-1930s, and it is good to remember that many of the sets were run by rechargeable batteries, and thus available to farm families without electricity.4 Moreover, journals and newspapers had sections devoted to radio programme schedules. These included broadcasts tailored to meet farmers’ interests, and the programmes at times were intended for specific regions, such as for the Midlands, West country, Scotland, or Wales. Among the broadcasts sent out by the Minister of Agriculture was one that was to be aired ‘in the event of war breaking out’. Not only did it call for sacrifices in general from the farming community, but it also set forth in some detail the

measures that would be put into effect and the role that local authorities would exercise in overseeing the process.

There was also, of course, the printed word, which took a myriad of forms. One was when rural citizens took the time to write directly to the government. Another was when people expressed their concerns in letters to the journals of previously described lobby groups, such as the National Farmers’ Union’s *NFU Record*, the Central Landowners’ Association’s *Journal*, the National Union of Agricultural Workers’ *Land Worker*, and the Women’s Institutes’ *Home & Country* magazine. These journals reciprocated by keeping their members informed through editorials and articles about what the government was doing to prepare rural Britain for the contingency of war. A third form was national newspapers, such as *The Times*, and a fourth was two agricultural periodicals, the *Farmer & Stockbreeder* and the *Farmers’ Weekly*, which also attempted to inform and solicit opinions from readers on food and rearmament matters. And finally there were the regional newspapers, including Norwich’s *Eastern Daily Press*, Plymouth’s *Western Morning News*, the *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, and the weekly *Hereford Times*, which were published in some of the nation’s premier agricultural regions.

The impact of the above written and unwritten sources has been demonstrated in a number of rural studies. Although almost all of the field work for the studies was done in the 1950s and 1960s, they also go back into the pre-war period and show, in most instances, that even in relatively remote regions change was occurring. It can be seen in the introduction of a rural bus service or of electricity. Or it might be a result of governmental measures, as in the sell-off of large estates after World War I or in the changeover from livestock to dairy farming in Wales. A further source of change were progressive farmers, such as A. T. Loyd from Berkshire and James Keith from Aberdeenshire and Norfolk. Both owned large farms, believed in scientific agriculture,

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and assumed a number of important positions in their regions, including serving as chairs of their country agriculture committees during World War II. But whether the impetus for change came from individual or governmental initiatives or was primarily a product of the times, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the country landscape was in the process of being altered forever.

With regard to the second and third questions, the information conveyed to rural citizens and their suggestions as to what might be done to deal with food and defence-related issues, it is easier to depend on written than on unwritten sources. In a democracy such information—given and received—is always a two-way street. The government both solicits advice and imparts information. We have already emphasized the government’s solicitations, whether in the form of consulting with the National Farmers’ Union or bringing in business leaders as trade advisers.

But governments further receive unsolicited advice as well. Lt. Col. John Haig from the Highlands, for example, was one among many rural persons who wrote to the Prime Minister asking what he could do ‘to help my Country’? He then added a sense of urgency to his April 1938 letter: ‘It is up to the Government’, he said, ‘to act now and speedily.’ John Colville, the Secretary of State for Scotland, also received numerous letters that ranged in content from expressing despair to suggesting ways to relieve rural plight. In December 1938 Lord Caithness, representing the Aberdeenshire NFU, indicated that local farmers, who depend on oats and beef production ‘for making ends meet, are dissatisfied, very much discouraged, and in many cases really angry. The causes’, he said, ‘are rather complex but it does seem pretty clear that something must be done, if the [farmers’] position is to be restored.’

Lord Caithness’s being upset makes sense of the rather bizarre suggestion that Colville received while visiting north-eastern Scotland. It was that Aberdeen grain merchants pack up fourteen-pound (6.3 kg) bags of oats and then have them distributed and sold ‘to each household in Great Britain’. The anonymous person making the suggestion admitted that he was not sure if the British public would be willing to purchase the oatmeal, but if they were, the scheme would benefit not

7 Lt. Col. John Haig to the Prime Minister, 2 Apr. 1938, AF 43/123, SRO; Earl of Caithness to John Colville, 20 Dec. 1938, AF 43/123, SRO; ‘Note of Visit by the Secretary of State for Scotland . . .’, 19 Jan. 1939, AF 43/143, SRO; and Anonymous to Colville, 12 Jan. 1939, AF 43/124, SRO.
only Scottish farmers, ‘but also would be of lasting value to the country as a whole’. In another anonymous communication to the Scottish Office the writer applauded the government for giving farm workers better pay and more holiday time. But he said that farmers now feared the new benefits ‘are making the servants [workers] more independent, and they look askance at the prospect of having to sit side by side with them in the Church on Sundays’. Government officials acknowledged they received comments similar to those in Scotland from throughout the United Kingdom.

Among the national newspapers The Times stands out. Not only was it the unofficial mouthpiece of the government, but it also had a rural readership. This readership probably went no farther than the country houses, but the paper still considered farm issues to be of sufficient importance to warrant a separate agriculture correspondent.

Opinions from the countryside—and from villages, towns, and cities—were expressed in the usual form of letters to the editor. They might be collective communications from political parties, organizations of agricultural or food associations, such as mill operators or meat packers, or they might come from well-known or little-known individuals. But all were written to inform the public and to promote changes in the way the government conducted its business. By 1936 almost all of the letters that dealt with food and agriculture were linked in some way to defence.

What were the issues? Although most of them have been discussed before in the context of governmental activities, the letters convey a sense of urgency that is missing in departmental memos and parliamentary acts. One of the most frequently addressed issues was readers’ frustration about not being informed. A. P. McDougall, a frequent letter writer and leading agriculturalist from Banbury, indicated in October 1936 that even though the government had instituted plans ‘for safeguarding supply in the event of an emergency . . . so far as most of us are aware, nothing has been done’. Two years later readers were still concerned. George Jarrett of Clevedon in Somerset complained he had ‘no idea of what the [government’s] food production programme will consist of’, and Lewis A. Thomas of Lord Cultivators Ltd. in York derided the lack of planning by the Minister of Agriculture. ‘All we know’, he wrote, ‘is that there will be considerable demands.’ Representatives of the Surrey National Farmers’ Union followed up on

8 The Times, 23 Oct. 1938, 10; 17 Oct. 1938, 10; and 24 Oct. 1938, 22.
Thomas’s criticism by stating that the Ministry was not really ready for war production. Their conclusion was that ‘if farmers were suddenly asked to perform impossibilities, this failure will lie at the Ministry’s door and not at that of the [agriculture] industry’.

Another frequently addressed issue was merely making sure that the government had any agricultural war policy at all. A letter to this effect appeared as early as March 1936. It was signed by, among others, Lord Ernle, a former Minister of Agriculture, and by Dorman-Smith, who at the time was the National Farmers’ Union president. The missive may well have been a reflection of what was happening anyway, for the ministry was already heavily involved in interdepartmental discussions about the role of food and agriculture during wartime. But the letter underlined the extent of public concern. A related suggestion, which the government was also addressing, was that it make use of trade experts. In April 1937 S. Owen Webb of West Wickham in Cambridgeshire put it in the following terms:

My humble opinion would be this. Get together the best men possible who understand the business irrespective of whatever organisation or party they may belong to and ask them to devise some scheme which would safeguard agriculture in the national interest. But do not delay, as the present piecemeal legislation for agriculture with no continuity of policy [is insufficient].

A third issue, also of a general nature, was historian G. M. Young’s suggestion of a need for a land survey ‘so that one would know the possibilities of the land in peace or war’, a notion seconded by Lord Bledisloe and other Central Landowners’ Association leaders. The proposal was not acted upon until into the war itself, but it took on major significance after the conflict as well as during it. A fourth issue, nationalization of the land as advocated by Sir Daniel Hall, the controversial agricultural scientist, was not so well received. His 24 June 1938 letter evoked, as he and the editors no doubt expected, a flurry of rebuttals. Their main counter arguments were that it would mean more regulations and would cost a lot. The money, in their view, would be better spent on ensuring farmers a better price for their products or on the navy, which was necessary to help guarantee the nation’s food supply.

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9 Ibid., 5 Mar. 1936, 10, and 5 Apr. 1937, 20.
11 The Times, 27 June 1938, 10; 29 June 1938, 10; and 2 Aug. 1938, 15.
There were further a number of letters on more specific issues. The Central Landowners’ Association wanted additional governmental subsidies for land drainage. MacDougall, Hall, and Independent MP Salter wanted more wheat and potatoes grown, though ‘Bill’ Gavin of London warned that increasing potato production ‘indiscriminately in time of peace might well bring about a complete collapse of the market’. Salter was also in the forefront of advocating that the government store various crops during peacetime, as were Bryan Guinness, writing from Paris, W. A. Sibley of Gloucester, Lennard Alston of Cambridge, George Brudendall of Petersborough, and Mrs C. Gilchrist Thompson of East Mallo y in Kent. Wiltarding Thompson (no relation) of London suggested notifying county councils, ‘in confidence if need be, that certain lands will be required by the State for aerodromes or trunk roads’ for defence purposes. Thompson further thought that the Agriculture ministry should protect certain areas from becoming military installations because of their productivity.

The issue of increased domestic production was also popular. Most of the letter writers favoured more home-grown food, and the sooner the better. M. Zveginstov of Hammersmith in London, however, disagreed. He favoured increasing ‘expenditures to ensure control of overseas supplies’ rather than pinning ‘our faith to an expansion of a system of agricultural production which will force up prices now [in 1937] and may prove a handicap when economy of manpower is required’. Lady Astor, always suspect because of her American background, also had the audacity to bring up that more home-produced food would mean higher prices for the consumer. H. Whiford-Hawkey, the General Secretary of the Rural Reconstruction Association, disagreed, and pointed out that the problem was not the farmer, but various middlemen. George C. Solley of Sandwich in Kent wrote, ‘If Lady Astor intended to irritate agriculturalists, she has been successful.’

Not only did The Times hear from advocates for farmers and consumers, but company and board executives also wrote letters supporting their points of view. Kenneth Lightfoot and Joseph Raymond of

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14 Ibid., 27 Feb. 1937, 8.
16 Ibid., 5 Dec. 1938, 20.
17 Ibid., 31 July 1936, 15; 3 Aug. 1936, 15; and 26 Apr. 1937, 11. This was before the differentiation into saturated, monounsaturated, and polyunsaturated fats.
the cold storage industry, for instance, wrote in July 1936 that the country’s cold storage capacity needed to be increased, and that the increase ‘should be put in hand forthwith, as it would be too late when the emergency is actually upon us’. The chairmen of the Bacon Development, Bacon Marketing, and Pigs Marketing boards contended that the government should encourage an adequate supply of home-cured bacon in wartime, since no food is more important than fat, and bacon is one of the most important sources of fat. Thomas Baxter, the chair of the Milk Marketing Board, wrote that to be prepared for war ‘the Government must give close attention to [milk], the nation’s premier food’. Obviously, *The Times* was serving as an outlet for corporate along with numerous other interests.

But *The Times* and other urban newspapers were also conveying information and rendering their own opinions about the food–defence relationship. They used a combination of editorials, articles, and reports of parliamentary debates to keep readers abreast of what was occurring. Although it would be repetitious to go over all the issues *The Times* discussed, its treatment of some of them will help us realize that people were receiving a good deal of information.

In 1936 *The Times* first set out to convey the importance of food during wartime. In an 11 March editorial, on the heels of the Rhineland crisis, the paper emphasized that collective security implied endurance, and endurance depended ‘at bottom on security of supplies’. In this regard, the editorial continued, ‘Food is the primary need, then raw materials’. Then, harking back to the Great War, it went on: ‘The public, which remembers the narrowness of our escape from the submarine danger, is aware that such a threat may be repeated in new and multiple forms.’ As a consequence, the editorial concluded: ‘It [the public] wants some inkling of how the Government see a solution of the problem.’

Portions of a comprehensive food policy were addressed in *The Times*’s pages throughout 1936. On 16 and 17 March, for instance, it reported on questions in parliament about ‘replacing imported with home-grown food’, on the importance of nutrition (Sir John Boyd Orr’s report on deficiencies in the diet had just been released), and on the need to set up a ministry for food supply. Prime Minister Baldwin had replied that home food production was being examined, and that Orr’s report was being referred to an advisory committee in the

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18 Ibid., 11 Mar. 1936, 17.  
19 Ibid., 16 Mar. 1936, 18, and 17 Mar. 1936, 7.
Ministry of Health. But he admitted that a food ministry had yet to be established. A *Times* editorial the next day, the 18th, highlighted the significance of more home-grown food and of improving the nation’s health. Both of these measures, it stated, were essential to ‘a wise food policy’, a point repeated in an editorial two weeks later.

The *Times* also reported on a Lord Cranworth speech in the House of Lords in July, in which he stressed the importance of a ‘secured food policy’ for all citizens—town and country. He further pointed out the relationship between defence in the narrow sense and food in the broader sense. In his view, home production would save on the number of cruisers needed to escort food convoys across the seas. The reason, he added, was that ‘whereas a cruiser was a wasting asset, a prosperous agriculture and a prosperous countryside was an increasing asset, bringing in its wake employment, health, and capital’.

In November the paper brought the necessity of food for defence to a head. On the 9th the *Times*’s agriculture correspondent reported what he perceived to be widespread opinions among the populace. For one thing, he stated, Britain’s largely urban population realized it needed ‘ample supplies of food [and nutrition] to maintain its health and physique’. For another, even though farmers did not like subsidies, given existing conditions, they were beginning to accept that a ‘comprehensive’ system of subsidies might be necessary. For yet another, the correspondent pointed out that ‘farmers are business men and not philanthropists’. The government must give them further encouragement by revising existing trade treaties that would assist home agriculture even more.

On the 13th the paper reported that Baldwin had brought up in the Commons what the government was doing to deal with ‘the food supply in time of war’. The Prime Minister admitted that not all of the problems had been completely solved, but he then listed issues on which progress had been made. They included measures by the armed forces to protect our food supplies, plans for coastal and anti-aircraft defence of the ports, progress on the diversion of shipping, drawing up a rationing scheme, and plans to increase domestic food production. What remained to be done, he said, was to set forth ‘a feeding policy’, which had been called for earlier by Sir William Beveridge’s committee on rationing. The feeding policy was to include possible reserves of

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21 Ibid., 10 July 1936, 7.
22 Ibid., 9 Nov. 1936, 18; 13 Nov. 1936, 8; and 30 Nov. 1936, 13.
food as well as food control. On the 30th the last concern—food control—became a priority when the government announced the creation of the Food (Defence Plans) Department within the Board of Trade. An editorial that same day voiced its approval as follows: ‘The public will be glad to note this fresh evidence that the plans of the Government are comprehensive, and that special attention is being given to not the least important part of any sound system of defence.’

During 1937 The Times continued to report on food and defence-related matters. Much of the discussion revolved around the government defending its policies and the public and members of parliament criticizing it for failing to make sufficient progress on such issues as increased home production, better prices for farmers, and providing and storing food reserves.

Given the ongoing interest in defence, the paper had Beveridge write a series of articles which appeared on 22–4 February. The articles’ theme was ‘Home Front in War’, and it covered a wide range of topics from the evacuation of London to the possible transfer of Britain’s aircraft industry to North America. The article on the 23rd, however, focused on food supplies. In it Beveridge urged the government not to adopt half-measures. This meant appointing immediately a food controller, who was, in turn, to have officials and committees ascertain the nature of the wartime diet to be aimed at, the minimum requirements for each type of food, the proportion of imports and home production for each food, the policy and methods of storing reserves in peacetime and a ‘shadow scheme’ that would take into account food production in case of a long war. In other words, Beveridge was calling for a detailed and yet long-term food policy.

As expected, Beveridge’s feature elicited a number of responses. With regard to food A. N. Duckman of Mill Bank wrote that he agreed with Beveridge that livestock would be a problem because animal feed would compete for tonnage on ships. But the letter writer hoped this would not leave the impression that livestock would be ‘a luxury in time of war’ since dairy cows and pigs would still be crucial food products. Dr Cloudesley Brereton, writing from London, thought Beveridge was correct in his assertion that the government should tell landowners and farmers now what they ought to do to prepare for war and then help them

23 Ibid., 15 Feb. 1937, 18; 8 Mar. 1937, 20; 14 Apr. 1937, 12; and 4 Nov. 1937, 8.
do it. Brereton ended his letter by stating a farm is not a factory, for one cannot hurry up nature. No matter how good the ‘shadow scheme’, it will take at least six months before it will begin to bring results. C. T. Joice of Fakenham in Norfolk also wanted to see the government undertake immediate measures to have more home-grown food, for putting more agricultural land into production is a slow process ‘even in a state of peace’.

Beveridge’s interest in the food problem did not end after the appearance of his articles. In a letter written from Salzburg on 6 August he criticized the government for not having decided, among other issues, whether the country should store up food.26 His criticism prompted *The Times* to write an editorial which defended the government for not being as dilatory as Beveridge alleged, although the paper acknowledged that the government should be building up the nation’s food reserves, an action which did not begin until April 1938. Beveridge’s letter also caused Malcolm Brereton of Norfolk to write in support of Beveridge’s urging the government to act now. Brereton further said that he and his father, who was a friend of Beveridge, had often wondered if any good for farmers would come out of the London School of Economics (where Beveridge had until recently been its head), but in this case it had. Brereton’s last remark is of interest because it underscores the ongoing scepticism of farmers who work the land towards academics and scientists and, by extension, advisers who mainly theorize about it.

In 1938–9 *The Times* continued to criticize and prod the government, but the tone of the argument started to change. The emphasis was not so much on what the government was doing wrong or not handling in a timely manner as it was on the necessity of the country pulling together to face the threat of war. In late January 1938 a *Times* special correspondent wrote a series of two articles on food plans and defence.27 In contrast to Beveridge’s articles a year earlier the correspondent stressed that a lot was being done. To be sure, the correspondent still pointed out problems, such as the government’s lack of action in procuring food reserves, but he wrote more about the government’s plan to increase home production, the activities of the food trades, the


purchase and control of overseas supplies, and the nature of rationing. If one took the time to read the articles, there was no doubt that a good deal was happening, and The Times was giving the reader timely information.

Those who responded to the articles said they were reassured, though Christopher Turner, a leading Lincolnshire farmer, thought the government was underestimating the difficulty of importing food in wartime, and R. G. Stapledon, a well-known agricultural expert from Aberystwyth, wanted all the ploughable grassland ploughed up immediately.28 Picking up on the last theme, The Times’s agriculture reporter urged the government to help increase the soil’s fertility by encouraging the use of more fertilizer. Looking back with nostalgia to an earlier era, the article concluded: ‘What a change could be wrought in the face of agricultural England and in the real production from the soil if farmers everywhere felt confident enough to farm their land to full capacity as their fathers did a generation ago!’

During the rest of 1938 the paper duly reported on meetings and on parliamentary debates at which government officials explained and defended their emerging food policies.29 On 20 September 1938 Sir Henry French, the Director of Food (Defence Plans), spoke at an International Grocers’ and Provisions Dealers’ luncheon and reassured them that the same food distribution system being used in peacetime would continue in time of war. He also remarked that around 1,500 local food authorities would spring into action within twenty-four hours of the outbreak of hostilities. On 16 November William Morrison, then Minister of Agriculture, asserted before the Commons that, keeping in mind the needs of the nation as a whole, the government was doing all it could to improve the efficiency of agriculture through better marketing, additional drainage grants, more research and education, and better livestock distribution.

In 1939, in March, French first went before Manchester Provision Exchange members and then the National Farmers’ Union Council to fill in details of Food (Defence Plans) activities.30 He explained that only some foods—meat, bacon and ham, butter and margarine, cooking fats and sugar—would probably be rationed. Others, including potatoes and bread, would be spared, but they would still be controlled. He also told the NFU that prices would be prescribed on home-grown

28 Ibid., 1 Feb. 1938, 15.
29 Ibid., 20 Sept. 1938, 7, and 16 Nov. 1938, 8.
food ‘from the time they left the farm until in the hands of the consumer’. Farmers would sell their products locally to authorized traders acting as agents for the wartime food ministry. He further made clear that animal feed would be distributed by agricultural merchants, wheat would be sent to millers rather than directly to farmers to feed livestock, and livestock would be purchased by designated auctioneers. On 20 March *The Times* reported on another aspect of the food and defence equation, stating that plans were being completed to provide, if necessary, food supplies for people being evacuated from the cities. And on 18 April the paper indicated that comprehensive plans were now ready for the onset of war.

Although a 24 April editorial cautioned against putting agriculture on a war footing prematurely, since it would ‘dislocate’ the farm economy, and it would further be impossible to predict precisely the measures required, the country was already moving in that direction. During the spring and summer the ploughing up campaign was instituted, the limited military draft set in motion, and local committees for both food and agriculture prepared to function immediately if war broke out. These measures, as catalogued in *The Times* and other urban dailies, signified that preparations for war in the food sector had been made, and that people in the countryside were increasingly aware of what to expect.

If, on the other hand, the city newspapers failed to reach portions of the rural population, farm weeklies were another possible source of information. In this respect the farming community was well served. Two periodicals, the *Farmer & Stockbreeder*, and the *Farmers’ Weekly*, were available, and, according to a wartime survey, both were widely read. (Forty-three per cent of farmers polled said they read the *Farmers’ Weekly* and 51 per cent the *Farmer & Stockbreeder*.) Both were also quite similar, and yet there is no editorial indication as to why *Farmers’ Weekly* began appearing in 1934. Perhaps the publisher and editor felt they had a superior product to the *Farmer & Stockbreeder*, which had begun in 1911. In any event, the similarities are striking. Both wanted to appeal to as broad a rural audience as possible. Hence, both had articles and sections devoted to primarily women’s concerns and to Young Farmers’ Club news and both had editorials and reports on parliament. Both also had weekly columns, ‘On and Off the Farm’, by ‘Blythe’, in

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33 The two periodicals merged in 1969.
the *Farmer & Stockbreeder*, and one written by A. G. Street for the *Farmers’ Weekly*. In addition, both had close liaison with the National Farmers’ Union, and both included letters to the editor, though *Farmer & Stockbreeder* did not start that feature until 1937.

In content, their editorial position was what one would expect: pro-farmer. This meant they were for better prices for farm goods, sound farming practices, and the government not neglecting the farming community. Like most weekly magazines, they were interested in the issues of the day and often responded to them rather than attempting to shape events. In political matters, they were Conservative, but willing to publish other opinions. They were also very discerning about the political climate as it related to agriculture, but less interested in the food industry. Both liked Walter Elliot, for example, the Agriculture minister between 1932 and 1936, and both further supported his successor, William Morrison, though less wholeheartedly.34 Both were less outraged by Chamberlain’s July 1938 Kettering speech than one might expect, but both gave relatively sympathetic coverage to Labour’s attempt to make political capital out of his indiscreet remarks.35 A 13 September *Farmer & Stockbreeder* editorial was close to the mark when it stated: ‘While some aspects of the Labour Party’s farming policy are distasteful, there is evidence that Labour is making a serious effort to secure the support of farmers.’ In the end, the attempt probably did not change many party allegiances, but it does show the concern at the time.

Both periodicals were very impressed with Dorman-Smith’s appointment as Minister of Agriculture in January 1939.36 *Farmers’ Weekly* was more accurate, however, in attributing the reason to the Conservative’s desire to head off the widespread discontent in the countryside, while *Farmer & Stockbreeder* columnist ‘Blythe’ mistakenly thought Chamberlain wanted a more dynamic minister. Both also did not hide their scepticism towards Food (Defence Plans). True, *Farmer & Stockbreeder* applauded French’s being named director because of his long-time involvement with the Agriculture ministry.37 But both were afraid

Food (Defence Plans) would slight agriculture, even though the future Food ministry would be as important to rural Britain as Agriculture during wartime. Interestingly, just after the war broke out, Farmer & Stockbreeder filled its pages with agriculture-related materials, but said nothing about the Ministry of Food.

In terms of food, agriculture, and defence, beginning in February 1936 the two periodicals discussed at least four interrelated themes. The first was their belief that what would be good for agriculture in wartime would be good for agriculture in peacetime, and vice versa. In other words, if the government promoted higher prices, more domestic production, increased soil fertility, and better living conditions, the farming community—and the nation—would benefit whether the country was at peace or war.

Second, although the Farmer & Stockbreeder and Farmer’s Weekly addressed a number of defence-related issues, such as food storage and distribution, their main specific emphasis was on producing more home-grown food, and their hope was that it take place as soon as possible. This desire for more home-grown food gave rise to some rather extreme assertions. Though not written specifically with defence in mind, a Farmer & Stockbreeder article in October 1935 suggested ‘that England could at least double the present wheat acreage’, and a Farmers’ Weekly letter from G. A. Jackson of Colesborne in Gloucestershire contended that ‘we can produce all the food necessities of our own people’. Most of the editorials and articles, however, called for more home-grown food within reasonable limits. But the periodicals still quoted prominent figures, from politicians to scientists, to support greater national self-sufficiency. Churchill, for instance, in speaking before the Central and Associated Chambers of Agriculture, remarked that an increase ‘in home supplies . . . [would be] an indispensable element in national defence’. R. G. Stapledon, the Welsh expert, said that farmers should ‘get ready to feed the nation’. Turner of Lincolnshire wrote that ‘increased home food production should be one of the main lines of national defence’. Sir John Russell, the English agricultural scientist, while speaking at Leeds, also urged an ‘increase in home

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39 F & S, 28 Oct. 1935, 2641, and 17 Nov. 1936, 2723; and FW, 17 Apr. 1936, 10; and 5 Mar. 1937, 16.
production’, though he warned that ‘a wartime agriculture would involve a very drastic change in our diet’ with less meat and more wheat and other cereals. Nevertheless, despite the diversity of opinion, the major point was that farmers should push for greater agricultural production now. The irony is that when the government instituted a programme for greater production in May 1939, Farmers’ Weekly, while generally supporting the ploughing up campaign, brought up many of its problems, including infertile soil, unsuitable land, and insufficient labour and equipment.

The third theme was that the government should tell farmers what they should do to prepare for war.41 ‘Blythe’ in the 4 May 1936 issue of Farmer & Stockbreeder wrote that ‘the time is ripe for the Government to say exactly what they expect of agriculture’. The column was written in anticipation of a National Farmers’ Union delegation meeting with Prime Minister Baldwin. The next week, however, the journal’s headline read, ‘Mr. Baldwin Extends Sympathy, But NFU Deputation to 10 Downing Street Comes Away Empty Handed’. In June 1938 Farmers’ Weekly reported on a question posed to then Agriculture minister Morrison in Weymouth about the government’s home food policy.42 Morrison’s reply was, ‘What fools we should look if we interfered with the [agriculture] industry, applying compulsory powers and building up an artificial system to guard against a war that never happened’. Morrison’s response obviously was not one to endear farmers to the government. But both periodicals were heartened by one of the government’s actions during the September 1938 war scare. At this time it summoned ‘the leaders of farming and representatives of the food branches’ to London, and at a secret Whitehall conference told them about its plans for controlling food production and distribution should war break out.

The government’s disclosure is closely related to the fourth theme, which is, that those associated with farming will wholeheartedly support the nation if it is under the threat of war. This was a constant refrain.43 Dorman-Smith wrote in a 1936 feature, for example: ‘If we [farmers] are called upon to play our part we shall not be found wanting.’ A Farmer & Stockbreeder editorial during the Czech crisis said, though in a somewhat self-serving manner: ‘If Mr. Chamberlain’s

41 F & S, 4 May 1936, 1053, and 11 May 1936, 1120.
42 FW, 14 June 1938, 19; F & S, 20 Sept. 1938, 2193; and FW, 30 Sept. 1938, 15.
43 F & S, 16 Mar. 1936, 639; ‘Unity’, 20 Sept. 1938, 2193; and 29 Aug. 1939, 2070; and FW, 12 May 1939, 53; and 16 June 1939, 45.
mission fails, the country will have behind it [the government] a united farming community—united to strengthen the first line of defence, namely, food production.’ During 1939 Farmers’ Weekly published articles on the Women’s Institutes and the Women’s Land Army, which stressed the useful work they were doing in preparing the country for war. When the Polish situation reached a crucial stage in August another Farmer & Stockbreeder editorial indicated that if the crisis escalated into war the enemy will be faced ‘by a united nation’. In short, patriotism had become the order of the day.

The food- and defence-related issues in the national newspapers and the farmer weeklies were generally the same as those emphasized in the regional press, but there was a difference. Whereas those with a national readership discussed domestic production, food imports, and the like on a nationwide basis, the regional papers, as one might expect, focused on the impact of national and international concerns on their localities. Although it is impossible to cover the entire country, it is possible to get a flavour of this difference by looking at newspapers in four of Britain’s prime agricultural areas.

One important local newspaper was Norwich’s Eastern Daily Press, which covered East Anglia. As mentioned earlier, this was the nation’s premier wheat-growing (and to an extent sugar beets) region and an area of long-time farmer and worker discontent. The Daily Press consisted of twelve to sixteen pages, with the first few pages, as with most British newspapers, devoted to classified advertisements. Besides the usual articles, editorials, features, and letters on a variety of matters, the paper paid a good deal of attention to agriculture. It had a regular column, ‘Farm Notes’, by Headland, and a regular Saturday feature, ‘Farm and Field’, often written by an official from the Norfolk Agricultural Station. In addition, there was a section on Women’s Institute news, and the ‘Today’s Broadcasting’ section often highlighted agriculture-related programmes.

The paper’s first mention of the food–defence relationship was on 5 March 1936, and it was tied in with the rearmament budget that was being proposed by the government.44 Picking up on a talk by John Morgan, a broadcaster and agricultural expert, before the Norwich Rotary Club, the editorial commented that ‘a defence policy that ignores the importance of the “food front” is seriously incomplete’.

44 Eastern Daily Press (EDP), 5 Mar. 1936, 8.
From this point on the paper was filled with food and agricultural concerns and their relation to defence. On 7 March, in an editorial, ‘Agriculture and Defence’, the paper brought in the influence of the National Farmers’ Union, which was especially strong in the area. It noted: ‘The NFU . . . is pressing vigorously for this aspect of national defence [the encouragement of home food production], and rightly so.’ The editorial went on to state that the expansion ‘cannot be left until wartime’, but must be undertaken beforehand, because nature cannot be hurried. On the 19th, although not linked to defence, it lauded the Women’s Institutes as a ‘vital force in rural life’, and an organization that has ‘wrought the most striking change that has taken place in village life for centuries’. The paper was so taken by the Institutes that it reported on their annual conference in London as well as on local activities. The women’s group obviously had a sympathetic voice when it turned its attention to defence matters later on.

The Daily Press also reported on various local meetings, which were increasingly a forum for discussing the food–defence relationship. On 2 April 1936, for instance, it described Dr Cloudesley Brereton’s speech before the Norwich Royal Club in which he reviewed what the government was doing on ‘the food front’. On the 9th it discussed the annual dinner of the Fakenham National Farmers’ Union, at which both President Dorman-Smith and Edwin Gooch, head of the National Union of Agricultural Workers, were present. J. F. Wright, the secretary of the Norfolk NFU, who has already been mentioned in relation to the East Norfolk by-election of January 1939, presided over the meeting, and the main topic of the evening was the importance of agriculture in defence. In an August editorial the paper asserted that the regular meetings of another group, the Norfolk Chamber of Agriculture, were also exceedingly valuable, since that was where the county’s three rural classes—farmers, landowners, and workers—could get together ‘to discuss industrial problems [in agriculture] and policy’.

Another relationship that the paper brought to light was how traditional farm issues became associated with defence. Regarding the depressed state of agriculture, an April 1936 article discussed ‘the growing anxiety about the possible dangers of food supplies in the

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45 Ibid., 7 Mar. 1936, 8; 19 Mar. 1936, 8; and 21 May 1936, 9.
46 Ibid., 2 Apr. 1936, 8; 9 Apr. 1936, 15; and 24 Aug. 1936, 6.
47 Ibid., 8 Apr. 1936, 8, and 12 June 1937, 8.
event of war and the insistent demand from many sources for . . . a national food and nutrition policy’. These two factors, food supply and food policy, were combining, the paper said, ‘to make an unanswerable case for a national effort to make farming pay’. Fourteen months later, when discussing increased food production, columnist Headland repeated the same refrain. ‘An adequate price [for food]’, he said, ‘would bring this [profit for farmers] about more speedily than many would think’. But a letter in October 1938 conveyed the continuing frustration of farmers with the government. In it, Sidney Dye of Swaffham, wrote:

The real truth at the bottom of British agricultural policy under the National Government is this—that it is their supporters in the City of London who get the greatest profit for importing cheap foodstuffs into this country. Until you change that position we shall never have sound and just policy for the development of our native land to its fullest extent.48

Closer to home, the Daily Press wanted more done for grain farmers.49 In a 7 July 1936 editorial it lauded the increased subsidy for beef, but it hoped the government’s defence thinking also took into account that ‘a balanced agricultural policy involves the coupling of support for arable farming as the key to the full success of its livestock assistance’. Two days later the paper called for increasing the supply of wheat as a remedy for ‘the admitted shortage of food stocks’. It was therefore quite pleased when the government said it would raise the amount of wheat to be subsidized (from 27 to 36 million hundredweight (1.4–1.8 million metric tons)) in its 1937 Agricultural Act.

The Norwich paper was also greatly concerned about what was happening in the food sector.50 In May 1936 it duly reported on Beveridge’s committee ‘to investigate the national food position’, though it thought the committee would look into storage and underused farmland rather than rationing. But in its 30 November edition the paper correctly linked Beveridge’s work on rationing to the formation of Food (Defence Plans), and it gave complete and accurate coverage as to what the new department would be asked to do and the role of Henry French as director. One of the articles demonstrated the depth of its reporter’s knowledge when he wrote: ‘It is probable that this food aspect of defence was raised by the deputation, led by Sir Austen

49 Ibid., 7 July 1938, 8; 9 July 1936, 8; and 28 May 1937, 8.
50 Ibid., 23 May 1936, 8, and 30 Nov. 1936, 6–9.
Chamberlain and Mr. Churchill, which on Monday last, interviewed the Prime Minister [Baldwin].

Similar to most newspapers, the *Daily Press* also did not neglect the political dimension of food, agriculture, and defence. Headland devoted his entire 7 November 1936 column to praising the outgoing agriculture minister, Walter Elliot, and assuring readers that Morrison, who ‘comes from farming stock and represents an agricultural constituency’, would be a suitable replacement. Nevertheless, a May 1937 letter from J. C. Collings of Bungay showed that farmer discontent had not disappeared, and he urged members of the Norfolk Farmers’ Union to vote ‘for the resolution now before the local branches to institute a political levy for the purpose of forming an agricultural party’.

Yet the paper was not overly critical of Neville Chamberlain’s July 1938 speech at Kettering. It explained that he did not say Britain ‘should not grow any more food’. What he did say was that the country ‘cannot become self-sufficient in agriculture and that we should not try to organise agriculture on a war footing during peacetime’. Six months later, however, the *Daily Press* gave extensive coverage to the East Norfolk by-election, during which the Conservative candidate, J. F. Wright, withdrew to allow the Liberal, Medlicott, to defeat Labour. The pay-off was the appointment of Dorman-Smith as Minister of Agriculture and the end of the NFU’s threat to form a separate party. The *Daily Press* also described in detail the aftermath, including the farmers’ protest march in London on 1 February 1939. Instead it was turned into a demonstration of support for Dorman-Smith, though the 2,000 demonstrators still heard a number of complaints. These included an Essex worker who ‘contended that agriculture must go on with their [sic] protests to the Government until they get full satisfaction’, and a farm wife who lamented that her husband, along with many others, ‘found it impossible to cover production costs’.

On the 4th Wright attended the annual NFU meeting for south Norfolk at Diss. The chairman opened the meeting by stating that ‘there was little doubt that Mr. Wright could have won East Norfolk but he was able to do their cause greater good by standing down, and they had seen one result in the appointment of a practical farmer as Minister of Agriculture’. Wright responded: ‘The widespread crisis with which the agriculture industry is confronted has led to Government

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51 Ibid., 7 Nov. 1936, 12, and 21 May 1937, 7.
52 Ibid., 6 July 1938, 8, and 2 Feb. 1939, 11.
53 Ibid., 4 Feb. 1939, 10.
action that augurs well for the future.’ He ended, undoubtedly with a sense of satisfaction, that ‘this great change in the Government’s attitude towards agriculture has come about in the course of a few weeks, and those who possess inside information know what was primarily responsible in bringing this about’. Interestingly, Wright did not disappear from the scene, and later in 1939 he wrote a number of columns for the Daily Press in which he explained the government’s position on farm issues.

In between Kettering and the East Norfolk by-election, the paper reported on the Czech crisis. After it subsided, the Daily Press covered a meeting in East Suffolk, at which the County Clerk thanked the many organizations that had readied themselves to help in case the emergency turned into war. They included the County Council, Women’s Institutes, Air Raid Precaution groups, and local constabulary. The article ended with a statement by Sir Robert White, who had chaired the meeting. He told those in attendance that ‘we had just gone through one of the most dramatic weeks anyone remembered’. Despite all of the praise for a job well done, three days later columnist Headland reminded readers that a good deal remained to be done ‘to provide for adequate food production’ should a war break out.

During 1939 Daily Press reporting reflected an increased sense of urgency. In February and March two pieces in the paper called for more allotments, which would, ‘while having a defensive value . . . also be of substantial and permanent benefit in time of peace’. A letter from H. L. Nathan went further. He wrote: ‘The production of food stuffs on allotments must now be considered an essential part of any plan for national defence.’ Ever attuned to political developments, on 10 March the paper published an editorial which proposed increased subsidies for a number of products, including oats, barley, and sheep as well as wheat, poultry, and milk. On the 23rd, at the annual meeting of the Norfolk Women’s Institutes, Lady Suffield, the president, announced that the Health ministry had received offers to accommodate two million unaccompanied children and teachers in case of evacuations. The WIs were to assist in a number of ways, such as setting up communal kitchens in the reception areas. On the 29th Wright warned, ‘The international situation today was such that there must be maximum preparedness in every direction’.

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55 Ibid., 8 Feb. 1939, 13; 3 Mar. 1939, 8; 10 Mar. 1939, 8; 23 Mar. 1939, 8; and 29 Mar. 1939, 8.
The sense of urgency continued during April. On the 8th columnist Wright addressed the import problem, noting that representatives from the Dominions and Empire had agreed to regulate their imports so as to maintain price levels for Britain’s domestic products. On the 16th, in an article, ‘Food Plans in Time of War’, the paper gave a clear summary of what would happen in the food sector in case of war. The measures, it said, would include the implementation of a rationing scheme, the establishment of a food ministry, which would absorb the current boards and commissions, and the formation of some 1,400 local committees. But near the end of the month Wright, at the annual meeting of the Attleborough Farmers’ Union, still complained that ‘the more they [NFU officials] asked what was expected of them, the less information they received’. A few days later the government announced its ploughing up campaign.

During July and August the paper continued to give extensive coverage to food–defence issues. A letter from Lord Addison, the Labour spokesperson on farm questions, said that farm workers not only needed to be assured that they would be included among the reserved occupations, but they also must ‘not suffer financially because now, after years of neglect, his country needs his skill’. Nevertheless, protests from the countryside had not completely abated. A letter on 24 July signed ‘150 Acres’ indicated that in the face of lower prices for wheat, ‘we are suffering’. He said that he would not be able to make ends meet, and that farmers needed to get together so that their views became known.

But the primary emphasis remained one of anticipation rather than protest. A 25 July article described the beginnings of the Women’s Land Army, which now had 9,000 volunteers signed up. In West Suffolk Chairperson Lady Briscoe said that we have fifty to sixty girls from London being ‘fixed up’, by which she meant in training. On 30 August an editorial discussed two vital issues. The County ‘War Ags’ would be given wide powers should war break out, and prices would be set by the Food minister. The next day the editorial, as in most papers, urged the population not to hoard. It also reported that evacuations were proceeding. Twelve thousand were expected at Yarmouth, 9,000 at Downham Market, 3,200 at Lowestoft, 3,000 at Diss, and others at

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56 Ibid., 8 Apr. 1939, 14; 16 Apr. 1939, 13; 28 Apr. 1939, 15.
57 Ibid., 8 July 1939, 13; 24 July 1939, 13; 25 July 1939, 11; 30 Aug. 1939, 6; and 31 Aug. 1939, 6.
Thetford and King’s Lynn. On 3 September Britain was officially at war. The *Eastern Daily Press* had done its part to inform the public about what to expect.

Another daily newspaper with a strong agricultural base was the *Western Morning News*. Published in Plymouth, its readership included not only Devon but parts of Cornwall as well. Similar to its East Anglian counterpart in format, it ran twelve to sixteen pages and stressed local along with London-based news. It had many agriculture-related articles and editorials, and once a week it had a section on ‘West Country Agricultural Topics’. It, too, covered many of the same issues as the Norwich paper, such as parliamentary acts, changes in the cabinet, food control, and especially the need for more home-grown products.58 On the local level it followed the activities of the Young Farmers’ Clubs; praised the Women’s Institutes, which had 200 branches in Devon and a membership of 11,268; and covered the major NFU meetings in the region.59

Also, like its eastern equivalent, the *Morning News* at times showed its frustration about not being informed by the government.60 On 11 October 1938, in the wake of the Czech emergency, the paper wanted more information. It wrote, we know that the government has plans for food, has even stored some, and intends to start rationing certain commodities if there is a war. But ‘what the public does not know is whether the arrangements are sufficient, or even whether Ministers think they are’. It would like answers to these questions, especially in light of increasing home production and probable price controls. Though Conservative in outlook, when the Labour leader, Clement Attlee, said later in October that he was ‘not impressed by what is known of official preparations’, the *Morning News* was more than happy to print his statement. Comments such as those above may have been part of the reason the government stepped up its effort in 1939 to tell the public more about preparations in the food sector.

The one major difference between the Plymouth and Norwich papers was that while the latter stressed wheat, the former emphasized dairying and livestock. In December 1936, for example, the *Morning News* discussed in detail the necessity of passing a new livestock bill that would result in better prices while at the same time continue the beef

59 Ibid., 5 Nov. 1936, 11; 27 Nov. 1936, 10; and 11 Oct. 1938, 6.
subsidy. Even though the two issues, prices and subsidies, had been a concern to farmers for years, its advocates now tied it closely to defence. The key, according to Major Raynor, the MP from Totnes, was to give the soldiers more home-produced food, particularly British beef. He admitted that despite the recent agreement with Argentina it would cost more than imported meat, but ‘in matters of defence’, he stated, ‘we cannot count the cost’. In January, when the livestock bill became law, Western farmers, and the Morning News, were obviously pleased.

A third newspaper of interest is the Hereford Times. Hereford is in the centre of a mixed farming area, and the paper carried a considerable amount of agricultural news. In contrast to the Plymouth and Norwich papers, however, the Times was published only once a week on Saturdays. In its sixteen pages it devoted one page to agriculture and kept up especially with the activities of the Hereford Farmers’ Union but also to an extent with the Women’s Institutes and other agriculture-related organizations. But it was never as aggressive as the two dailies in its reporting of events. It mainly followed stories rather than having any agenda of its own. The only definite position that it took was that it normally backed Conservative initiatives and opposed ‘Socialist’ ones.

The first time the paper linked food and defence was not until 19 December 1936. A letter from S. Box of Hereford stated that ‘at last the farmers of this country were waking up’ to the fact that agriculture and defence had a lot in common. In his opinion, ‘Good farming would result in increased food supplies, increasing prosperity to the countryside, internal trade and safety for the nation’. During 1937 the Times continued to push for increased production, but it generally followed the government’s lead and went no further than agreeing that the Agricultural Act of that year was a step in the right direction.

In 1938 it applauded a speech by George Gibbard, the president-elect of the National Farmers’ Union, at the Herefordshire annual meeting. It particularly liked his insistence that both ‘food and armaments were vitally necessary’. The paper also concurred with him that ‘it was rubbish to say that the Government had done nothing; they had done a great deal, but there was a great deal more to do’. But like others in the rural areas, the Times was impatient. In a February editorial

61 Ibid., 3 Dec. 1936, 8; 4 Dec. 1936, 8; and 19 Dec. 1936, 8.
62 Hereford Times (HT), 9 Mar. 1935, 12.
63 Ibid., 9 Dec. 1936, 8; 10 Apr. 1937, 8; 29 May 1937, 9.
64 Ibid., 15 Jan. 1938, 10; 22 Jan. 1938, 8; 12 Feb. 1938, 8; and 10 Sept. 1938, 14.
it criticized the government for not yet undertaking food storage, and it then moved into the production question, stating: ‘We want an agriculture encouraged to still greater production now and ready for and capable of quick and great expansion in time of emergency.’ Yet, after Chamberlain’s speech in July, the paper was not especially critical of the government, for it seemed to accept the opinion of J. P. L. Thomas, the MP for Hereford.65 At a meeting with the Executive Committee of the local Farmers’ Union he had assured them ‘that the Prime Minister’s views had been misconstrued, and he [Thomas] had made it clear that the Government was determined to give agriculture a square deal’.

In 1939 the Times continued to report on a number of food- and defence-related activities.66 One was the local issue of accommodating children from Birmingham in the Bromyard region in case of war. A letter from W. L. Lyon of Malvern claimed that the Bromyard rural council would prefer to construct ‘proper’ huts for the evacuees and to have the schooling, medical supervision, and catering provided by Birmingham. At the national level the paper greatly approved of the selection of Dorman-Smith as the new agriculture minister at the end of January. It quoted Capt. C. R. Edwards, the well-known Herefordshire hop grower, as saying: ‘Taking the appointment at face value, it is the best break agriculture has had in my time.’ Moreover, it is not surprising that the Times also approved of the ploughing up campaign when it was announced in May. An editorial said that the complaint of agriculturalists ‘has been that they had been left somewhat in the dark as to the lines on which they would have to proceed [with the campaign]’, but now they had received ‘in part an answer to this question’. In August the paper reported that Herefordshire would probably be expected to sow an additional 4,000 acres.

Still, despite the normally enlightened letters printed in the Hereford Times, on occasion, as with all newspapers, a relatively unenlightened letter is received.67 In this case it was one from a ‘farmer’s boy’ who had just joined the NFU. He wrote: ‘The land, if farmed properly, will pay for itself and give good return to the farmer, but it is impossible for it to throw off enough profit to keep a lot of highly-paid officials with very little experience in farming to tell the farmer what to do with the land and the crops’! In times gone by, such a statement might have had

65 HT, 14 July 1938, 8.
66 Ibid., 14 Jan. 1939, 7; 4 Feb. 1939, 15; 6 May 1938, 8; and 5 Aug. 1939, 8.
67 Ibid., 20 May 1939, 7.
some merit, but it was certainly at odds with what was happening in 1939.

The fourth and final local paper to be examined is the Aberdeen Press and Journal. The most obvious difference between the Aberdeen paper and those of Norwich, Plymouth, and Hereford is that the Press and Journal was Scottish. But this difference can be overdrawn, for in many respects the Aberdeen paper resembled the English papers. It was twelve pages, with classifieds making up the first few pages, and it emphasized local and national news. It also devoted a page daily to agriculture, though the material was mainly information about previous and upcoming meetings, agricultural market prices, and good farming practices. And like the others it seems to have been a vibrant force in its local area.

But there were differences. For one thing, at times Scottish resentment toward the English crept into the paper. This was especially evident in 1936 when it pointed to the English subsidy for wheat, while there was none for oats, the dominant crop in Aberdeenshire. Nor was there any aid for barley, which was important in other parts of Scotland, and beef, the other main farm product in the Aberdeen region, had also been left out, even though the English farmer was ‘earning a beef subsidy for inferior meat’. The message was clear: when will the Scottish farmer be treated fairly? In 1937 parliament acknowledged the oversight by including oats and barley subsidies in its Agriculture Act (later increased), and it also made Scottish livestock farmers eligible for the beef subsidy. Another difference was that the Scots were greatly concerned about inadequate rural housing. So were the English, but whereas their local papers seldom delved into the matter, the Press and Journal published a number of articles about it. The interesting point from our perspective is that the paper linked improved housing to a more healthy rural population which, in turn, would produce more food for the country in time of war.

The Press and Journal first addressed food and defence directly on 10 July 1936. The occasion was a House of Lords debate, and the conclusion of the editorial was that the debate demonstrated an adequate food supply in wartime was essential, and ‘it should be most thoroughly explored’. Like the other papers, the Press and Journal did not neglect giving the food and defence relationship continuous coverage.

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68 Aberdeen Press and Journal (APJ), 8 July 1936, 6, and 12 Aug. 1939, 3.
69 Ibid., 18 Sept. 1938, 8.
70 Ibid., 10 July 1936, 6.
71 Ibid., 27 Sept. 1938, 6, and 30 Sept. 1938, 10.
During the Czech crisis, for example, the paper ran an editorial to re-assure the public that ‘national food stocks’ would be sufficient to meet any emergency. It went on to tick off some of the reasons: the nation had bought food reserves, there would be more intensive home production, rationing would be instituted, an extensive organization would administer the programme, and so on. When the crisis was at its peak the paper published a resolution of the 13,000-member, combined Scottish Farmers’ Union and Chamber of Agriculture. The resolution assured the Prime Minister of the ‘willingness of those engaged in the agriculture industry in Scotland to place at the disposal of the nation, in the event of an emergency, their organisation and all their resources of the land which it is in their power to offer.’

This blending of patriotism and preparations for war was a constant theme in 1939. In August the Press and Journal duly discussed plans for evacuations from Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Dundee. Forty thousand of the evacuees were to be sent to Aberdeenshire. As the Polish crisis deepened the paper reported on townspeople in Aberdeen stocking up (actually encouraged by the government), preparing for possible air raids, and being given gas masks. In a manner reminiscent of a year earlier, on 31 August the paper reassured readers that the government had done a great deal to safeguard ‘food supplies if this country were faced with war’. The article then summarized the evolution of the Food (Defence Plans) Department, and the underlying message was that the food situation was in good hands. Two days later the Press and Journal informed its readers that Food (Defence Plans) had frozen food prices for the time being at their 31 August levels (actually the 28th). Preparations were thus being made as the ordeal began.

How well then were the rural people informed about what would be expected of them? As we have emphasized, they received a great deal of information from a variety of oral and written sources, and their concerns at times had an influence on what the government did. But we have also shown that no matter how well informed it never seemed enough, or timely enough, for some individuals and groups. Even those who were informing the public on occasion complained that they were being kept in the dark. What was happening, of course, was that the media were involved in the usual cat-and-mouse game in which the government was telling it some things, but withholding other things.

\[72\] APJ, 5 Aug. 1939, 5; 26 Aug. 1939, 5; 31 Aug. 1939, 6; and 2 Sept. 1939, 1.
The *Farmers’ Weekly*, for instance, at one point said, ‘the Government seem unable or unwilling to commit themselves to a definite policy’, and people might get the notion that the government was in a state of drift. But that was not the case, at least in terms of food and agriculture. From 1936 on the government had a good idea of what it wanted and needed to accomplish. The problem was that it did not always get its objectives across to the public in an effective manner, even though the public was given a lot, one is tempted to say tons, of information. One suspects, however, that the complaints were not so much because rural people did not know what they would have to do, but because they were reluctant, after so short an interval, to face again the disruptions, hardships, and horrors that remained embedded in their minds from 1914–18. They had been told what to expect, and they would do their bit, but in truth the prospect was almost too horrible to contemplate.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Food in Wartime, 1939–1940

Vigorous action, founded on expert advice, will bring farming and food to their best. Thus from the war . . . these benefits may come: a prosperous agriculture and a nation educated in nutrition.

*Eastern Daily Press*

On 3 September, two days after Hitler’s army and air force had launched their attack against Poland, Chamberlain declared to Parliament, the British public, and the world, ‘this country is at war with Germany’.\(^1\) While the nation had been moving in that direction for some months, its beginning still sent shock waves throughout the United Kingdom and beyond. Nevertheless, Britain and its allies once again girded up their strength to oppose, as Churchill put it, that ‘monstrous tyranny’ known as Nazi Germany.

It is not our purpose to follow the vicissitudes of that monumental undertaking. Our task is much less daunting, but it is still of importance. It is to answer the question, how well did the government’s plans in food and agriculture work out? To answer this question, it is necessary to look at what the government did during the first eleven months of the conflict, for between September 1939 and early August 1940 the machinery for feeding the nation was put in place and had assumed a definite sense of direction.

Taking a leaf from the framework used in earlier chapters, we will assess how well the government succeeded by describing first how the food and agriculture sectors organized themselves and how they handled the question of prices. Next, we will discuss the agriculture-related measures—the ploughing up campaign, the labour issue, and farm mechanization. This will be followed by a look at aspects of food control: imports, distribution and storage, food supply, evacuations, the armed forces, and rationing. Then we will examine how the

\(^1\) 351 HC Deb., 1938–9, col. 292, 3 Sept. 1939.
government anticipated dealing with jurisdictional disputes that might arise between the Agriculture and Food ministries despite the government’s long-term attempt to keep the issues handled by each area separate and distinct. At this point we will relate the reaction of the lobby groups and the rural population as a whole to what was occurring. And finally we will discuss two exceedingly significant events to round out our picture—a Cabinet reshuffle on 3 April 1940 and the formation of the Churchill government beginning on 10 May. These two changes brought in their wake a Scientific Committee on food questions and a long-range statement on food policy. Now armed with an inclusive, rational approach to the food problem, the government could look back, if it ever had the time to do so, with a sense of satisfaction for a job well done.

To place food and agriculture and their relation to the early stage of the war in context, it will be helpful initially to discuss briefly the military and diplomatic developments between September 1939 and July 1940 as well as the major happenings on the civilian front. From a military and foreign policy standpoint, the most obvious development was Germany’s defeat of Poland within a month. This was followed by a six-month hiatus during which Britain and France tried to figure out ways to hold the Nazi menace at bay (some even advocated peace), while the Western Allies built up their military strength to oppose the enemy. But Hitler abruptly ended the so-called Phoney War by attacking neutral Norway and Denmark on 9 April 1940. The British and French responded by undertaking a series of measures to stop Germany’s takeover of Norway, but they were inept, and the Wehrmacht continued to hold the upper hand. While the combat in Norway proceeded, on 10 May the Germans unleashed their long-anticipated invasion of France and the Low Countries. That same evening King George VI accepted Chamberlain’s resignation as prime minister and called upon Winston Churchill to form a new government. His appointment did little to halt the German forces, however, and by mid-June it had become obvious that they had won a resounding victory. (By this time, they had also taken all of Norway.) As the Battle of France drew to a close, the French decided to surrender, and as we all know, Britain and many of the Dominions found themselves holding out

alone. The Germans, who had been joined during the later stages of the fighting by Italy, now had to decide what to do next, and the war entered another phase. Happily for Britain, and for the world, the situation eventually turned around, but that did not occur until many months later in the conflict.

At home, during the first eleven months, the transition to a war economy started somewhat creakily, but soon picked up steam. The extent of the changeover is evident in some basic war production figures. In terms of military aircraft, for example, British industry produced 7,940 in 1939 and 15,049 in 1940. The increase in tanks was not as dramatic—from 969 in 1939 to 1,399 in 1940—but the 1940 total jumped three and a half times to 4,841 in 1941. In naval construction, the 1940 Programme added 321 ships of all types, though no capital ships, to the rapidly expanding inventory. Moreover, the number of individuals under arms increased from around half a million in 1939 to over 2.2 million in 1940. Just as importantly, unemployment, that albatross of the 1930s, dropped from 1.3 million to 700,000 during the same period. Wartime Britain had become a reality.

The government also responded in expected ways. Chamberlain established a War Cabinet, and it became the central institution for running both the military and the civilian sides of the conflict. The Whitehall machinery also expanded dramatically to reflect its new responsibilities. Among the new ministries were Supply (actually established in August, a month before the war), Shipping, Economic Warfare, Information, Home Security, and, most importantly for our purposes, Food. In addition, a National Service component was officially added to the Labour ministry.

Two results stand out. One, not only did the London-based administration of thirty departments employ thousands of personnel, but many of them had branches throughout the country that engaged (many as volunteers) thousands more. And two, one is struck by the interrelated nature of the effort. The number of interdepartmental committees came to total several hundred, and while they varied in

importance, all of them were responsible directly or indirectly to the War Cabinet. One example of how the departments were expected to relate to each other is the Food Policy Sub-Committee. It was headed by Sir Samuel Hoare, the Lord Privy Seal, and the other members were top officials from the Scottish Office, Colonial Office, and the Food, Agriculture, Health, Shipping, and Transport ministries. It was to look after broader aspects of food policy, and while it conceived of its brief in narrow terms, Food Policy and similar committees were vital elements for overseeing the war economy. Despite its complexity, the committee system, with which the British government was so familiar in peacetime, was expected to play an even more crucial role in the wartime setting.

As with the other departments, officials in Agriculture and the new Food ministry had already prepared to organize themselves for war before it started. When it broke out the Agriculture ministry, headed by Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, duly shifted its seventeen London-based divisions to wartime duties, though the size of its staff remained about the same at 3,500. Three of the most important divisions were to see that supplies were provided to farmers. They included a division for animal feed, another for tractors and implements, and a third for fertilizers and seeds.

The more than 100 War Agricultural Executive Committees also sprang into action. Each consisted of eight to twelve unpaid members, and the chair was often a prominent farmer or landowner. They represented the Agriculture minister and were directly responsible to him. Assisting them were full-time paid staffs made up primarily of land agents, agriculture organizers, technical advisers, and university personnel. Each county was further divided into four or more districts. They had their own local boards, and they had under them a number of Sub-Committees that functioned according to task, such as one for drainage, animal feed, cultivation, labour, and the like.

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6 FP(O)(39), 1st Meeting, 28 Nov. 1939, CAB 74/8, PRO.
7 MAF, Sept. 1939, MAF 39/20, PRO.
The tasks of the ‘War Ags’ and their subsidiary committees were set forth as part of the Defence of the Realm Act, passed just prior to the war. Their duties were extensive and included the right to inspect farmland and buildings and to render technical advice. They also worked with farmers to determine the type and amount of crops and livestock they would produce, the fertilizer needed and the labour and machinery required. In terms of machinery, the local committees often contracted the government-owned tractors and other equipment to individuals who then used the tractors to plough farmers’ fields. The most controversial task was the War Ags’ power to dispossess recalcitrant or inefficient farmers. While they did on occasion exercise this right in a high-handed manner (and thus became owners in the process), this criticism has to be placed over against the rise in productivity that came about. Nevertheless, one has to conclude that the committees should have acted with greater restraint, and their eviction practices mar an otherwise highly successful effort at the local level.

In the Food ministry, which was under William Morrison, the changeover to wartime duties was equally rapid. The six divisions based in London began to function, the marketing boards and commissions were enfolded into the organizational set-up, and trade advisers for the most significant commodities also started their work. The advisers included some of the country’s most prominent business leaders. Sir Alan Anderson, chair of Anderson, Green and Company, for instance, was to advise on cereals; Sir Francis Boys, Vice-Chair of the Livestock Commission, was the trade representative for meat and livestock; and Mr Herbert Davis, a Director for Lever Brothers, was to help with oil and fats. The ministry further set up three internal committees—an Orders Committee to ensure compliance with regulations, an Overseas Purchasing Board to coordinate foreign food imports, and a Margins Committee to regulate the amount of profit allowed (although the last was not established officially until April 1940). Moreover, Morrison had under him an Economics Division, a Statistics and Intelligence Division, and a Chief Scientific Officer to assist with long-range problems. The only major organizational difference between Food and Agriculture was that while Agriculture had 3,500 personnel, Food had only 375. That number for the Food ministry

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changed dramatically, however, during the early months of the war and reached 3,500 by March 1940.

Also like Agriculture, Food had an extensive local organization. Nineteen divisional officers were spread across the country, and they, in turn, had under them more than 1,400 local Food Control Committees.10 These committees had fifteen members each, one-third of which were usually local tradespeople. The other ten members were to represent consumer interests, and they normally included a trade unionist and a Women’s Institute officer among their number. The local committees were especially concerned about sufficient food reaching the shops and rationing, though rationing did not begin until January 1940.

Among the issues common to Food and Agriculture, none was more significant than price controls. The government had already determined that on basic commodities, such as wheat, livestock, and milk, it would become the sole purchaser and would pay farmers a guaranteed price equal to that they received at the outbreak of the war.11 If the market price rose above the guaranteed price, which it did in many instances, then the government was to make up the difference with a subsidy. The subsidy was to ensure farmers reasonably high prices but at the same time prevent inordinate increases from being passed on to the consumer. The Treasury earmarked £50 million for the first year to cover the cost.

The system did not work especially well at first. The government set prices on the basis of 28 August, but the cost of imported food rose much faster than expected as did the cost of imported feeding stuffs, and this forced the Food ministry to raise its guaranteed price for some products several times in 1939–40. (It also ushered in the constant readjustment of food prices throughout the war.) In addition, price controls for the basic commodities were not instituted on all of them at once, but piecemeal because of a lack of staff in London. The result was that prices for some commodities, such as oats and barley, were not controlled as soon as they should have been. And finally, as discussed earlier, price controls for food could never be completely effective unless other aspects of the economy were also controlled, and comprehensive measures, including procedures for dealing with excess profits and

10 353 HC Deb., 1938–9, col. 234, 8 Nov. 1939.
11 Ministry of Food (MF), ‘Minutes of a Meeting Held on Sept. 9, 1939’, MAF 72/106, PRO; Martin, Development of Modern Agriculture, 57–9; E. F. Nash, ‘Wartime Control of Food and Agricultural Prices’, in Chester, Lessons of the British War Economy, 205–9; and 359 HC Deb., 1939–40, col. 56, 2 Apr. 1940.
wage adjustments, were introduced only gradually. Not until the end of 1939 was the government getting a handle on controlling the entire economy.

In the Agriculture ministry, its most important function was to bring about increased home production. The programme actually had two parts, which the ministry for patriotic reasons called campaigns. One was the much heralded ‘Ploughing Up’ Campaign, and the other the widely popular ‘Dig for Victory’ Campaign.

The ploughing up campaign, it will be recalled, had begun before the war with the government offering £2 per acre for every additional acre put into production. When the war started Minister Dorman-Smith assumed the lead for the government to explain what the campaign entailed. On 4 September, in a broadcast intended primarily for farmers, he pointed out that their ‘job is to increase, in an orderly fashion, our home production of essential foodstuffs—a task just as vital to the nation as that which has to be carried out by the armed forces’. He then outlined the government’s programme. The goal, he said, was to plough up at least 10 per cent of the pasture or idle land. In other words, he wanted to put approximately two million more acres into production for the 1940 harvest. As an additional incentive the £2 per acre subsidy was to be extended to 31 December. The ploughed-up land was to be sown with wheat or potatoes, or possibly oats, barley, beans, peas, rye, or maize. He also assured livestock farmers that they would have sufficient animal feed. The Minister went on to state that the government was doing its best to see that farmers received necessary supplies. For the present they should rely on their usual merchants.

His final point was to tell labourers to continue working the land, the implication being that their participation was essential as well. In subsequent broadcasts Dorman-Smith indicated to farmers that the ministry was aware of the increased costs they were incurring, and that it would do all it could to have them realize ‘a fair profit’. In this situation, he added, agricultural workers should also profit. Dorman-Smith was correct. The average minimum weekly wage for labourers rose from 34s. 9d. (£1.74) in September 1939 to 37s. 2d. (£1.86) in December. But the wage level was still uneven, since it was being set locally by each county committee. In June 1940 the government took the issue in hand and raised the minimum to 48s. (£2.40) per week for adult male workers.

12 The Times, 5 Sept. 1939, 10.
In August 1939 the ministry announced its second campaign, the ‘Grow More Food Campaign’, but its subtitle, ‘Dig for Victory’, was the name that caught the public’s fancy. Dorman-Smith again took the lead in promoting it.\(^\text{13}\) In a broadcast to the nation on 3 October he stated: To increase home production, ‘we want not only the big man with the plough but also the little man with the spade to get busy this autumn. We are launching a nationwide campaign to obtain recruits to the ranks of the food producers’. The objective, he noted, was to provide citizens with half a million more allotments (mainly in urban areas) so that they could provide more of their own food, including potatoes, onions, carrots, and other vegetables. The allotments were to come from a variety of sources, but primarily from local authorities, who were to be allowed to take possession of unoccupied land and to divide them into plots. He also reminded his listeners that they might raise small animals, such as chickens and rabbits, for additional food. ‘The matter’, Dorman-Smith urged, ‘is not one that can wait. So let’s get going. Let “Dig for Victory” be the motto of everyone with a garden and of every able-bodied man and woman capable of digging an allotment in their spare time.’

How did the two campaigns work out?\(^\text{14}\) The answer is quite well. Despite Dorman-Smith’s misgivings—at least in private—that the farmers were not responding as he had hoped, the government, with the assistance of the county committees, did reach the two-million acre goal, and it set the stage for further increases. Moreover, the allotment programme, with the help of Women’s Institutes and various rural and village produce committees, undoubtedly produced more food. Although annual figures are not available, Murray estimates that the number of allotments increased from 815,000 in 1939 to 1,400,000 in 1943, and that the amount of land used for allotments rose from 95,700 to 136,800 acres during the same period.

Criticisms of the campaigns pale in comparison. To be sure, much of the newly ploughed land was old pasture and not particularly suitable immediately for crops, and the government’s desire to have more flax grown proved unsatisfactory since it was too labour intensive. Still, if the goal was more home-produced food, that goal was met in all parts of the United Kingdom.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 4 Oct. 1939, 5.

\(^{14}\) Thomas Inskip Diary, 10 Nov. 1939, INKP 1/1, Churchill Archives Centre (CAC), Churchill College, Cambridge University; Murray, _Agriculture_, 245–8; MAF, ‘Report on Food Production’, 2 Jan. 1940, MAF 74/285, PRO; and Edith H. Whetham, _British Farming, 1939–1949_ (London, 1952), 27–8.
The campaigns also had a number of ramifications for the nation’s war effort and for its agricultural policy as a whole.\textsuperscript{15} Expanded production was a real boon in that it saved on shipping space and foreign exchange. On the other hand, governmental subsidies to agriculture continued to increase, and this trend continued in the post-war years. Another emphasis of the campaigns was to grow food for human consumption, such as grains and vegetables, and this in turn helped improve people’s diets. At the same time, milk was also emphasized, and this had a beneficial effect on school children and expectant mothers (for whom it was soon made free of charge) as well as for the rest of the population. Finally, though the government did not forget about livestock, especially beef, for morale purposes, the replacement of pasture with cropland reduced the amount of meat available to consumers. The ploughing-up campaign and its ancillary, dig for victory, were accomplishing what the government, and the ministry, had hoped.

Tied in with greater production was the second major concern of the ministry: the labour problem. As it turned out, the problem was not as insuperable as anticipated, and primarily for two reasons.\textsuperscript{16} First of all, since the government considered agriculture a reserved occupation, the call up to the services was less than in many other areas, and secondly, a number of different groups filled in. The first factor, reserved status for farmers and workers over twenty-one and for ‘essential’ labourers over eighteen, was helped by the fact that officials were willing to grant furlough to servicemen with agricultural experience during planting and harvest time, and in some cases their enlistment was deferred for up to six months. A detailed study by F. G. Sturrock on the ‘Movement of Agricultural Workers on 157 Farms in the Eastern Counties during the First Year of War’ catalogues what happened.\textsuperscript{17}

According to the author, in September 1939, these farms employed 653 workers, and a year later 662. To make up for the 92 that left, 105 new workers were hired. They included 55 from other farms, 24 from non-farm occupations, 9 boys who had reached school leaving age, 8 Land Army girls, 7 casual workers, and 2 conscientious objectors. While


\textsuperscript{16} (MAF), 2 Jan. 1940, MAF 74/285, 2 Jan. 1940, PRO; FP(40)25, ‘The Agricultural Labour Position’, 19 Mar. 1940, CAB 74/3, PRO; and Angus A. Macleod to W. Bakel, Dept. of Agriculture in Scotland, 19 Feb. 1940, AF 59/9, SRO.

\textsuperscript{17} F. G. Sturrock, ‘Movement of Agricultural Workers on 157 Farms in the Eastern Counties during the First Year of War’, \textit{The Farm Economist}, 3/9 (1941), 161–2.
Sturrock pointed out that the new workers were not as skilled as those who left, the gap had, none the less, been filled. The success of the replacement process has led John Martin to conclude that ‘the supply of labour was considerably more elastic than was commonly believed’.18

The most publicized group, as mentioned earlier, was the Women’s Land Army.19 Although the training of volunteers had begun before the war, farmers at first were reluctant to hire them and preferred to use nearby unemployed or casually employed male workers. But by the spring of 1940, with the labour market becoming tighter, farmers became more receptive, and by the end of the year 6,000 were working in rural areas. (It reached a peak of 87,000 in 1943.) Many of them were from the cities, and they had to be at least seventeen to join. They were given uniforms consisting of a green sweater, brown breeches, high boots, and a brown felt hat; underwent four weeks of training; and then were to sent individual farms or lived under supervision in hostels. They often worked eleven-hour days and were to have a half-day and Sundays off, but that was often not possible because of the nature of their jobs. They did all kinds of work, but most often were used to milk cows. Some of them eventually even became tractor drivers. They were paid around 25s. (£1.25) per week with half of it used to pay room and board.

Shirley Joseph has written movingly about her experiences. She recalls being interviewed—among the questions asked, did she realize cows had to be milked every day?—and then she was trained and sent out to work. Her first job was at Warborough Farm, where she worked from 6.15 in the morning to 5 at night, and her most important task was to assist with morning and afternoon milking. On Wednesdays she received a half-day off, and she often used the time to hitch-hike to her home nearby. Her accommodation for part of the time was a cottage with no electricity or running water. Later, she worked out of hostels at Shrivenham, Bramley, and Faringdon. Though allowed to do some milking, her main jobs were threshing and hoeing crops, which she describes as dirty, hard work. She remembers the hard bunks, queuing for meals, the total lack of privacy, the boyfriends (some of them

Americans), the long hours of work. Her experiences were probably
typical of the 250,000 who served.

Part of the reason why the Women’s Land Army was increasingly ac-
cepted was that it was well organized. Lady Denman and the other
leaders realized that the training was not always adequate and that the
young women were not always treated with respect, but they tried to
keep local supervisors (often associated with the War Ags) informed
and even had a magazine, *The Land Girl*, published and distributed to
the workers. Denman was also able to enlist influential patrons. Queen
Mary, for example, was a big supporter, and she had land girls working
at Sandringham, one of the royal family’s country estates. While the
Women’s Land Army may not have played as large a role in solving the
agricultural labour problem as its backers have claimed, it did help,
and it was a worthwhile experiment.

Further tied in with increased production and the labour supply was
the ministry’s third main problem: mechanization. Before the war
the government had realized that more tractors and other machinery
could obviously help make British agriculture more productive and
would compensate for the expected loss of horses to the military.
Dorman-Smith had tried to sell the idea to the cabinet, but was turned
down. He did not give up, however, and talked Chamberlain and
Simon, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, into placing an order with
Fordson, the only firm capable of supply tractors in sufficient numbers.
Thus, at the war’s inception, the government was getting into the
tractor business.

The process generally worked as follows: part of the tractors were
turned over to county committees, who then let them out to contract-
ors, and the contractors ploughed some of the farmers’ fields. Other
farmers bought their own. Despite the rationing of petrol, farmers
were not restricted from using it for their machinery. As a result, trac-
tors became a common sight in the rural landscape. In 1939 the num-
ber in use was 56,200; by 1944, it had climbed to 173,000. Added to this
was a substantial increase in disc harrows, cultivators, binders, com-
bines, and milk machines, some of which were also controlled by the

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21 José Harris, ‘Great Britain: The People’s War’, in David Reynolds, Warren F. Kimball,
and A. O. Chubarian (eds.), *Allies at War: The Soviet, American, and British Experience,
1939–1945* (New York, 1994), 239–40; Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith Papers, MSS. Eur
committees. Even though horses still provided the bulk of the ‘power’ to till the fields—their number declined only from 649,000 in 1939 to 577,000 in 1944—farm mechanization was becoming a fact of life in Britain.

The tasks of the Food ministry were more inclusive than those undertaken by Agriculture, for the former was to handle all aspects of food control except for home production. This division of responsibilities, however, still did not preclude the two ministries from dealing with a number of common issues; nor did it put an end to the interdependency with other departments. In fact, interdependency was greater during the war than before it.

It is difficult to treat all of the issues the Food ministry faced, let alone to determine how well it carried through on them during the first eleven months of the war. Nevertheless, six were most important. The first to be discussed is the food import programme. Taking it over entailed a number of tasks: maintaining relations with foreign trading partners, developing procedures for purchases, determining the amount and type of goods to be purchased, procuring shipping, competing for shipping space. Even more uncertain was coping with the vagaries of the war. Would the trade routes remain open? What effect would the sea and air operations have on Britain’s ports? The government assumed that asdic, the device for picking up sound waves under water, would neutralize the submarine threat, but Germany’s surface fleet might still be a factor. And how would the war affect imports from the Continent?

Despite the uncertainties, the ministry obviously had no option but to forge ahead.22 It soon had the import machinery in place, and it made clear to allies, neutrals, and the Dominions and Empire that the ministry or agents would control food purchases and would base them on 28 August prices. It further established a licensing system for individual products (though not all) to differentiate between those Britain wanted and those it wanted to restrict or to prevent from reaching the enemy. Also in the background was the fact that the government hoped to use the system to ease the foreign exchange problem.

While instituting these measures helped, numerous problems still ensued. The government had overestimated the amount of merchant shipping it would have at its disposal and underestimated the non-combat disruptions the war would cause, even though before the war officials had estimated possible reductions in food imports of around 25 per cent. At first, because of the legacy of pre-war patterns, the anticipated difficulties seemed not to materialize, but it soon became apparent there were shortages, especially in wheat, and that the reserve was being used up. Moreover, the Food and Supply ministries were competing for cargo space, and so that problem had to be reconciled. Finally, the shortages meant that the ministry had to choose which products it would import. It had already decided to emphasize grain for human consumption, and not for animals, but it had to import enough feed so as not to deplete the dairy herds inordinately. The decrease in feeding stuffs did not have much of an effect on imported meat, at least at this point, for refrigerator ships were not in short supply. But, in the long run, the stress on grain products rather than on meat did, as stated before, have a considerable effect on the British diet.

By November trade in food imports was down to about two-thirds of normal, and shortages in some areas had become severe. But emergency shipments of wheat from Canada and a better familiarity with the procedures on the part of all the countries involved eased the situation by March 1940. Even the Norwegian campaign and the Battle of France in the spring did not interrupt the flow of goods for the time being. Despite a shaky start, the food import programme was now on a solid foundation. This solid foundation made it possible for the ministry to handle the drastic cuts that would be required in the future.

It is impossible to examine Britain’s relations with all of the countries exporting food to the United Kingdom. Some of them, such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, remained staunch trading partners as well as joining the British cause. Others, like Argentina, drove a hard bargain for its beef, wheat, and maize, but decided to continue its trading relationship with the British. Denmark, on the other hand, had exports, mainly ham and bacon, to Britain cut off, and the Food ministry had to make use of alternative sources (and to make do with less).

23 File 641.006/400, American Embassy to Sec. of State, 11 Sept. 1939, RG-59, Box 3398, NARA.
Two exceedingly important countries from a trade and a military standpoint were France and the United States. Throughout 1939 the British had been establishing closer trade links with the French, and when the war broke out the two allies set up an elaborate machinery for inter-country sharing and for joint purchases abroad. By November they had formed an Anglo-French Coordinating Committee. It was headed by Jean Monnet, later the foremost proponent of post-war European cooperation. The coordinating committee had under it nine committees, one of which was food. It was named the Anglo-French Food Executive Committee, and the fact that Sir Henry French was selected to lead the three-person British team is ample evidence of its significance. The main food committee also spawned a number of Sub-Committees, including ones for cereals, oilseeds and fats, and meat.

To get an idea of the subjects discussed, a look at some of the decisions the committee made at its 12 February 1940 meeting is instructive. Besides joint purchases, the French offered to sell oil cakes to Britain and to arrange for a shipment of salt from Djibuti to British East Africa. Britain, for its part, agreed to sell some of its Newfoundland cod and salted herring to the French. An example of pre-emptive buying was their decision jointly to purchase dried fruits from Turkey so as to prevent them from ending up in German hands. The motive was not so much that Britain and France needed the fruit as it was to help influence Turkey not to join the enemy side. The horse-trading at the February meeting thus served a number of purposes, and both French and British representatives regretted the dissolution of their coordinating machinery on 4 July 1940.

As for Britain’s trade with the United States, despite the November 1938 agreement—and the onset of war—relations between the two remained delicate. To be sure, both nations wanted increased trade, but it was always complicated during 1939–40 by American neutrality and British foreign exchange problems. In fact, early on Britain said it was interested in purchasing basic food products, but suggested paying for them with British goods, such as wool from Australia, rather than with hard currency. Not surprisingly, the Americans were not interested in

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24 E. E. Bridges to French, 21 Nov. 1939, MAF 74/23, PRO; French to Sir Horace Wilson, 25 Nov. 1939, MAF 74/23, PRO; Anglo-French Food Executive, 12 Feb. 1940, MAF 74/23, PRO; and FBC6(J)[40]57, 3 July 1940, MAF 74/23, PRO.

25 File 641.006/395, American Embassy to Sec. of State, 7 Sept. 1939, RG-59, Box 3398, NARA, and File 641.006/401, American Embassy to Sec. of State, 14 Sept. 1939, RG-59, Box 3398, NARA.
such an arrangement. Moreover, the US government correctly believed that the war continued Britain’s imperial preference system, which the Americans had long held put them at a competitive disadvantage in gaining access to British markets.

Nevertheless, Britain streamlined its trade links with North America, first by agreeing with Canada in August 1939 to set up a purchasing commission in Ottawa, and then in November extending it to New York City for American goods.\textsuperscript{26} The New York commission was later replaced by a more focused, Washington-based British Food Mission in April 1941, which, in turn, gave way to an Anglo-American Combined Food Board in 1942. Although both of these bodies were different from the 1939 version, they still owed their genesis to the purchasing commission.

Despite the complications, each nation kept the other apprised of its thinking. In November Chancellor Simon indicated to Ambassador Kennedy that ‘there will be no overall reduction of imports [from the United States]’, but he then reiterated, as the Americans well knew, that ‘purchases of certain goods must be reduced in order to enable other purchases to be increased’.\textsuperscript{27} The increases Simon envisaged were raw materials, machine tools, and military equipment, especially aeroplanes, but the purchase of aircraft was a sticky proposition in that the Americans were also finally interested in building up their own air corps.

The increases and decreases also related to food products. US officials were well aware that the value of British imports in that area was diminishing, and they predicted it could well decrease by as much as 50 per cent of normal.\textsuperscript{28} As proof, they cited recent British activities. Britain had virtually stopped buying fresh fruits, lard, and grain, though it usually purchased little of the latter in any event. Especially galling to American tobacco farmers had been the cut-off of that product. The British had offset the effect of their actions to an extent by continuing to purchase canned fruit and by increasing cotton imports, but it still was far from enough to overcome the overall decrease. Yet, they remained sensitive to American frustrations, and the Food ministry


\textsuperscript{27} File 641.116/2519, Kennedy to Sec. of State, 1 Nov. 1939, RG-59, Box 3402, NARA.

\textsuperscript{28} File 640.11, European War 1939/1, American Embassy, ‘Estimated Effects of British Entry into the War upon the American Economy’, 28 Nov. 1939, RG-59, Box 3394, NARA, and Hammond, \textit{Food}, i. 71.
made a large purchase of maize—which Britain definitely needed—from the United States in the spring. Therefore, the two countries might not always get along, but security interests continued to dictate that the two work out their differences in all areas, including the food trade. In retrospect, however, when one looks at the difficulties Britain faced in getting food imports from all of its trading partners during the early months of the war, they were minimal when compared with the difficulties the country was to experience in maintaining relations later on.

Since the air war over Britain did not materialize, carrying out a second area of food control, distribution and storage, had pretty much gone according to plan. A centrally located Division Room in the Ministry of Transport determined what was to be unloaded where by allocating products among the major ports. Wheat, for example, was mainly unloaded in the west and south, and meat and sugar primarily through London and Liverpool. Port Emergency Committees handled the day-to-day operational problems. Few of the commodities stored at the ports were moved inland, though 7,000 tons of meat, 8,000 tons of butter, and 30,000 tons of tea were dispersed from London’s docks to storage areas in the interior. When the air raids did not take place, the government had the goods replaced. As for distribution inside the country, private hauliers and wholesalers were contracted to make sure goods reached retail outlets. Although shortages at times did occur, as it did when meat was poorly distributed, it was seldom the fault of the transportation industry.

The third area of concern, food supply, did not fare as well as the distribution system. The basis of food supply was closely tied to the import programme and to the commodity control schemes—now pared to thirteen instead of the fourteen planned before the war. At first the supply of basic food products seemed adequate, but by October and November shortages were appearing, especially in cereals, feeding stuffs, and sugar. At this point the difficulties could not be overcome by home production, and so, in the case of grain, the shipments of wheat from Canada helped ease that situation, and in the case of sugar,
rationing, already widely anticipated, was the alternative selected. Animal feed remained a difficult proposition, but the government soon began decreasing the amount imported and further cut its use by rationing meat. By March the initial food supply crisis had passed, but it was a foretaste of problems to come. What the departments had learned was that flexibility rather than rigid programmes was the preferred method for dealing with food supply emergencies.

The fourth area with which the Food ministry concerned itself was evacuations from the major cities. Like distribution activities, evacuations were primarily the responsibility of another department, in this instance the Ministry of Health, but Food was still involved.\textsuperscript{31} It was to provide food for the evacuees at stops along the train routes and at the final destinations before they were placed in town, village, and farm homes. The county committees and various volunteer groups, such as the Women’s Institutes and the Women’s Volunteer Services, were heavily involved in this final phase.

The evacuations had actually begun on 1 September, two days before the declaration of war, and within ten days 1,500,000 persons, approximately half of whom were school children accompanied by their teachers and helpers, had been settled into mostly pre-arranged accommodation. As emphasized before, London was not the only city to have large-scale evacuations. About 15,000 from Birmingham and Liverpool, for instance, went to Herefordshire, and others from Southampton to Glasgow were sent to less endangered areas. When the air raids did not occur, the pressure was off, and the evacuees started returning home, some on their own, others more systematically. By January 1940 two-thirds of them were once again living in their own dwellings. The upshot of the ‘phoney’ evacuation was that it was, to be sure, premature, but it made subsequent evacuations, which were necessary, smoother and more accepted by the population.

The fifth main area of concern was dealing with the armed forces’ food requirements. From the beginning, the Food ministry took over this responsibility and established a Service Supply Branch to administer the programme.\textsuperscript{32} It seemed to work well. All parties well understood

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  \item \textsuperscript{31} Ruth Inglis, \textit{The Children’s War: Evacuation, 1939–1945} (London, 1989), pp. xi and 1–5; [Minister of Health], ‘Evacuation as it Affects Agriculture’, [Feb. 1940?], MAF 47/45, PRO; and HT, 9 Sept. 1939, 9.
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Hammond, \textit{Food}, i, 47–8; MF 1314/38, 11 Oct. 1939, MAF 74/300, PRO; MF, ‘Notes of Meeting Held at Ministry of Food’, 19 Sept. 1939, MAF 74/300, PRO; and MF, ‘Monthly Report’, 28 Oct. 1939, MAF 74/285, PRO.
\end{itemize}
that the services were to have the highest priority for food, and depots were set up in the United Kingdom to distribute bulk supplies to stations at home and to an extent abroad. But for much of the food at overseas bases, the ministry coordinated but allowed the service ministries to continue using their own sources of supply, many of whom were foreign agents. To ensure coordination the ministry had liaison officers assigned to work with the services, and it met with army, navy, and air force representatives to discuss common problems. Regarding provisions for troops beginning to arrive in France, it coordinated that effort with the Anglo-French machinery as well as with the services involved. Although there were complaints, the ministry reported on 25 October, ‘The plans made in advance for the coordination of the requirements of the services with the plans of the Ministry of Food have proved generally satisfactory’. This early spirit of cooperation obviously helped when the country had to cope with the dark days that lay ahead.

The final and by far most visible aspect of food control was rationing. The major problem with rationing was that even though every one expected it, it was slow in coming about. The Food ministry had already determined the system to be used—consumers registering with individual retailers—and the products to be immediately rationed—meat, sugar, bacon and ham, and butter, and possibly margarine, cooking fats, and tea—and this information was known by the public. But the government at first said most food except for butter was in good supply, and then, when it said rationing was necessary, kept putting off the date. Not until 8 January 1940 was rationing introduced.

In the meantime, the chorus of complaints multiplied. On 25 September members of parliament expressed ‘disappointment’ with the delay in rationing, and on 8 November an entire session was devoted to the government defending why it had not yet taken place. The Labour MP A. V. Alexander set forth the anti-government position. He pointed out that the national registration system, which was to form the basis for consumer registration, had been completed by the end of September and thus should no longer cause a problem. He had been amazed, however, that Food minister Morrison had stated, in a newspaper interview, ‘that supplies were so plentiful that no rationing was necessary’. Alexander’s rejoinder was, ‘[This is] in spite of the fact that...

33 The Times, 19 Sept. 1939, 8, and 30 Sept. 1939, 8, and Morrison, 31 Oct. 39, PREM 1/293, PRO.
34 351 HC Deb., 1938–9, col. 1276, 26 Sept. 1939; 353 HC Deb., 1938–9, cols. 269–375, 8 Nov. 1939; and Inskip Diary, 4 Dec. 1939, INKP 1/1, CAC.
complaints were still pouring in . . .’. He ended with a quote from the prominent retailer Alan J. Sainsbury, who said: ‘We believe that the only fair and equitable distribution of available supplies to the consumer is by the introduction of a rationing system.’

In the rebuttal, Morrison admitted there were initial problems brought on by getting the system started, and by supplies being diverted to the armed forces and a shortage of shipping. But he assured the members that the government was closely monitoring the situation and when necessary would set ‘the proper date’. Sir Samuel Hoare, the Lord Privy Seal, concluded for the government, patriotically declaring ‘that Germany can never starve out our country’. The opposition’s motion to have immediate rationing was defeated by 187 to 104. Reassured, the War Cabinet waited until early December to agree that rationing would be introduced sometime ‘after the New Year’.

On the 29th the government announced the rules for using the ration books that had already been distributed. They applied primarily to regular households, but the ministry also had special books for service personnel on leave; those needing extra rations, such as labourers doing heavy work; and for individuals whose work involved extensive travel.35 On 8 January—The Times could not resist chiding the government, ‘18 weeks after the outbreak of war’—the rationing scheme began. Every adult was to receive three and a half ounces of bacon and ham (when cooked) per week, 4 ounces of butter, and 12 ounces of sugar. To get an idea of the detail involved, the ministry stipulated that homemakers would be allowed an extra ration of sugar to make marmalade and bee-keepers extra sugar for their colonies. Meat was rationed next, in March, and then margarine, cooking fats, and tea in July. Among the products not rationed were bread (only as a last resort), potatoes, fish, and fresh vegetables, though they were still subject to price controls. For morale purposes, tobacco and alcohol were also not rationed. In fact, one of the favourite refrains governmental officials used when talking to the public about food controls was to declare there would be no restrictions on beer.

The instituting of selective rationing did not end all of the criticisms. People continued to complain—the sugar ration was insufficient, the price for butter too high—but for the most part it was fair.36 The

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35 The Times, 4 Dec. 1939, 8, and 8 Jan. 1940, 6.
government acknowledged there were black market activities and minor infractions, such as the illegal swapping of ration coupons, but they never became too widespread. Moreover, from time to time, the ministry made additional changes to improve the programme. The most notable was the introduction of a point system to supplement registration with retailers. With the new programme, the buyer was given points, and he or she was then allowed to use them to purchase goods of their choice from a limited, but non-rationed, list. This innovation, too, was considered a success. Overall, then, despite a belated start, the ministry and local officers did a commendable job administering the rationing system, in part because officials had done extensive planning before it was implemented, in part because it entailed the type of detailed work in which administrators often excel.

To keep the multitude of factors straight, the government relied on two previously mentioned bodies, the Food Policy Sub-Committee and a joint Food and Agriculture committee with the awkward title of the Interdepartmental Committee on the Coordination of Food Policy. The Food Policy Sub-Committee was the more broadly based of the two, and it was established in late November 1939.37 It had had a predecessor, the Food Sub-Committee, but the latter had been under the Committee of Imperial Defence and the new creation was responsible to the War Cabinet. It was chaired by Sir Samuel Hoare, and among its members were Ministers Gilmour, Elliot, Morrison, and Dorman-Smith, the architects of the government’s food policy before the war. The Sub-Committee had an additional pre-war cast to it in that it included numerous Treasury officials.

Its task was to keep ‘under continuous and close review the broader aspects of food policy’, which it construed to consist of four main problem areas: shipping, statistics, rationing, and domestic production. But even though the Sub-Committee did discuss these issues and received advice from other councils and groups, such as one made up of agricultural economists, it never went beyond dealing with immediate problems rather than establishing a long-range policy. At first, the main problems were rationing and the food supply.38 Once these were

1990), iii. Social Agencies and Institutions, 91–2; and Lord Woolton [Sir Frederick Marquis], Memoirs (London, 1959), 197.

37 FP(M)(39), 1st Meeting, 28 Nov. 1939, CAB 74/1, PRO; Hammond, Food, i. 59; [DA], ‘Minutes of the Conference of Agricultural Economists . . .’, 6 Sept. 1939, AF 81/1/1, SRO.
38 FP(M)(39), 2nd Meeting, 1 Dec. 1939, CAB 74/1, PRO, and FP(M)40, 6th Meeting, 5 Mar. 1940, CAB 74/2, PRO.
being dealt with, agricultural concerns, such as providing sufficient labour and the need for fertilizers, dominated the discussions, although throughout its existence the Sub-Committee was constantly looking at ways to control prices.

But the lack of a long-range policy, along with a lack of coordination, led to criticisms from both traders and consumers, and Chamberlain thus decided in late March 1940 to replace Food minister Morrison with a businessman, Lord Woolton. One of the things that happened soon afterward was a change in the name of the Sub-Committee to the Food Policy Committee, and Woolton insisted that it frame a long-range statement. The changeover to the Churchill government in May did not relieve the committee of this responsibility. Churchill retained the highly regarded Woolton, and he was no doubt pleased to have an appropriate statement on his desk by late July. Therefore, the problem of not having a long-range food policy statement had finally been solved.

The joint Food and Agriculture committee had been the pre-war brainchild of French and Fergusson. They used the committee, which included representatives from Scotland’s and Northern Ireland’s agriculture departments and from the Treasury, to discuss common problems weekly on an informal basis and to defuse possible jurisdictional disputes in the food area. Both French and Fergusson were of the same opinion: they wanted to maintain the confidence of farmers while achieving a productive wartime agriculture. To accomplish this objective the government needed to see that the farmer came out well financially but within reasonable limits. At times, the committee’s discussions were theoretical, such as how to influence farmers to grow a certain crop without excessive financial inducements or using compulsion. At other times its members addressed more practical matters, such as how to increase immediately the supply of oats and other feedstuffs from abroad. But whether theoretical or practical the two permanent secretaries were attempting to benefit farmers by achieving a proper balance between prices and production in a wartime setting.

How well then did the government and its ministries do in getting their food programme accepted? The answer is that, on the whole, the

39 FP(M)IC, 9 Apr. 1940, CAB 74/1, PRO, and FP(M)IC, 14th Meeting, 24 May 1940, CAB 74/2, PRO.
40 FP 1, [Sept. 1939?], MAF 53/146, PRO; FP 3, 31 Oct. 1939, MAF 53/146, PRO; and FP 20, 2 Apr. 1940, MAR 53/146, PRO.
public reaction, and that of rural interests in particular, was favourable. They seemed to accept that sacrifice and change were the order of the day. Many of the agricultural lobby groups, for example, changed locations (although most retained offices in London), and they met less frequently and disbanded some of their committees and converted others to wartime matters. In addition, they cut down on the number of pages in their journals as did the national and local newspapers. Yet, despite their loyalty and willingness to support the government, criticisms of its programme surfaced in various quarters—from parliament, the press and farmer weeklies to the activities and publications of lobby groups that had a keen interest in rural affairs.

As in the past, parliament is a good place to start, for the views of its members are a fairly good barometer of how people felt about the food measures being put into effect.\(^{41}\) As early as 26 September Morrison was obliged to assure the Commons that problems over the supply of butter and sugar were being dealt with and that the delay implementing rationing was a result of ‘trying to get an accurate count of the population’. On 8 November the previously mentioned debate over whether to have immediate rationing took place, and early in December, MP de la Bère wanted assurances that farmers receive a ‘reasonable price on goods’, and that price guarantees continue for ‘at least two harvests after the termination of the war’. De la Bère included this latter phrase as a reminder of what the government had failed to do for farmers after the first war. On 2 April 1940 the Commons again devoted an entire session to food problems. While Morrison admitted that the Food ministry had made mistakes initially and that ‘much remains to be done’, A. T. Lennox-Boyd, the parliamentary secretary, summed up the government’s position by saying that in terms of prices, food stocks, and rationing, it was doing a good job. The majority of the members agreed, though they continued to question the government when they felt it was not acting in the country’s best interests.\(^{42}\) Also, by this time, members of parliament, and governmental officials, well understood that the Food and Agriculture ministries were to see that the producer received a reasonable price and that the consumer paid a reasonable price and was supplied rapidly and yet fairly in the ‘least expensive way possible’.

\(^{41}\) HC Deb., 1938–9, col. 1241, 26 Sept. 1939; 353 HC Deb., 1938–9, cols. 279–82, 8 Nov. 1939; and 350 HC Deb., 1939–40, cols. 85–136, 2 Apr. 1940.

The Times discussed many of the same issues—prices, rationing, food supplies—that were addressed in parliament, but the paper better reflected individual concerns. Georgeanna Musgrove of Sussex, for instance, noted that the ‘dig for victory’ campaign was hurting local producers and thus there was a need for more permanent market stalls in towns. L. A. Dunn of Campden criticized the army for using inexperienced cooks, and the result, in his opinion, was wasted food. And Grace Paget of Shepton Mallet said that although more milk for the troops was a good thing, she suggested they would accept it more readily if it were ‘disguised’, such as making it into chocolate or adding it to vegetable soup.

Among the regional papers, with their local emphasis, the Hereford Times listed the eight members of the county war agricultural committee and reminded readers that two of them had served in the same capacity in World War I. It also included a letter from a cottager who was ‘worried’ about feed for his animals, and one of the paper’s editorials pointed out that the most pressing problem for local farmers in reaching the 75,000 additional acre goal for the next harvest was insufficient labour. It suggested postponing the call up of agriculture-related workers, a solution the government had utilized the year before. Like the others, Plymouth’s Western Morning News cut down on its length (in this instance from twelve to sixteen pages down to six), and one of its articles discussed ploughing up flower beds and planting them with vegetables. Not only would such a practice provide food, but it would also require less labour. Another article talked about Cornwall’s Women’s Land Army, which was organized by Mrs Peggy Pollard, and which had signed up 156 recruits as of April 1940.

Like other local papers, to save space, the Aberdeen Press and Journal decreased the number of classified advertisements and moved news articles to the front page. One of its main concerns was the need for higher prices for farm products, which reflected the same, strongly held position of the National Farmers’ Unions. The Eastern Daily Press out of Norwich discussed primarily increased crop production, but it also ran a number of articles on horticultural topics and the need for more vegetable gardens. It also praised the work of the Women’s Institutes.

43 The Times, 2 Jan. 1940, 4; 4 Mar. 1940, 4; and 14 Mar. 1940, 4.
44 HT, 2 Sept. 1939, 9; 6 Jan. 1940, 5; and 9 Mar. 1940, 6.
45 WMN, 8 Apr. 1940, 8, and 19 Apr. 1940, 8.
46 APJ, 30 Oct. 1939, 8.
47 EDP, 2 Oct. 1939, 8; 7 Oct. 1939, 9; 14 Mar. 1940, 11; 20 Apr. 1940, 4; and 16 Apr. 1940, 3.
headed locally by Lady Suffield, and the Women’s Land Army, which had 250 land girls ‘usefully engaged’ in West Suffolk. ‘What is especially encouraging’, according to a 20 April 1940 editorial, was ‘that the land girls are as pleased with farming as their farmer is pleased with them now that the early prejudice to which he confesses has been removed’. Despite the overstatement, the war had not stopped the local press from keeping their readers informed.

The Farmers’ Weekly and Farmer & Stockbreeder also combined information and support of the government with occasional criticisms. One area in which the weeklies were especially critical was the apparent lack of concern for farmers being exhibited by the Ministry of Food.48 The farmers’ main complaint was that prices for goods, which were set by the ministry, were often too low, as was the case for livestock and sheep. They were getting along with the Agriculture ministry, but according to the article, what Food officials needed to do was to take farmers into their confidence. In February 1940 the editor of Farmer & Stockbreeder was therefore heartened when Food minister Morrison stated in the Commons: ‘Farmers must at this time have a prospect of fair prices for the work they are doing.’ In an address before the Farmers’ Club in March, Morrison further felt compelled to say, ‘I hope you will get out of your heads an idea which I have heard expressed many times, that there is any difference of opinion or clash of interest between my colleague in the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries [Dorman-Smith] and myself. There is none.’49

Among the lobby groups, the National Farmers’ Union was the most critical. To be sure, when the war broke out, it offered its services to the government and ‘the offer was accepted promptly’.50 But the NFU was most concerned about the relation of prices to costs, and it pressed this point relentlessly when it consulted with the government. The government was listening.51 Agricultural officials (Dorman-Smith often attended) and NFU leaders began meeting on 19 September and met regularly thereafter. By December the farmers were getting results. The government agreed to increase the price guarantee for wheat and promised to look into increasing livestock prices as well.

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50 NFU Yearbook, 1940, 5, and Cyclo W 4/6, NFU Consultative Committee, 9 Nov. 1939, NFU Minutes, IAH.
51 NFU Yearbook, 1940, 29–33.
Still, NFU officials were not satisfied, in part because of continuing pressure from its branches, and the NFU insisted that the government raise prices even further. On 6 May 1940 their demanding attitude prompted Sir Horace Wilson of the Treasury and a key member of the Food Policy Sub-Committee to say that he was getting tired of the ‘complaints made by farmers, who as a class were certainly making adequate profits at the present time’.  

Before one is too critical of the NFU, it is good to remember that the Union had had a major influence on the government’s agricultural policy before the war, and some of its members were also influential in Conservative Party circles. Besides being the premier agricultural lobby, the NFU had tailored its operations to wartime needs by moving its headquarters to High Wycombe, setting up an Emergency Committee to deal with urgent matters between regular Council meetings, and having officials serve on governmental committees.

In effect, what had happened by 1939–40 was that the NFU represented the industry. For example, even though it did not like the Food ministry, it met with French and others on occasion, because, after all, Food was responsible for setting prices. By February 1940 President Peacock was revising his opinion of the ministry, which he said was increasingly sympathetic to agriculture, and the two groups agreed to get together every two weeks. Furthermore, the NFU was revising its opinion of the worker unions, and it sympathized to an extent with their desire for higher wages. Therefore, it met with labour representatives and agreed to make the unions’ views known to the government at NFU-Agriculture ministry meetings. When the government decided in April to raise the minimum wage, however, the NFU was upset because it was not linked to higher prices for farm goods. Finally, the NFU continued its pre-war practice of meeting regularly with its counterparts in Scotland and Northern Ireland. These two groups, the Scottish

52 FP(10)(40), 6 May 1940, CAB 74/8, PRO.
55 NFU Council to County Branch Secretaries, 28 Dec. 1939, AD1/NFU 22, IAH, and [NFU], ‘Report of General Purposes Committee’, 9 Jan. 1940 and 17 Apr. 1940, AD1/NFU 22, IAH.
56 [DA], ‘Memorandum by the NFU and Chamber of Agriculture of Scotland’, 11 Oct. 1939, AF 43/198, SRO; Farmers’ Journal, Jan. 1940, 212; and Ulster Farmers’ Union, Annual Meeting of Council, Apr. 1940, D1050/13/K/3, PRONI.
National Farmers’ Union and Chamber of Agriculture and the Ulster Farmers’ Union, were considered important enough in their own right to warrant representation on governmental committees in London, and they were also extremely influential with the agriculture departments in their own countries. As might be expected, the Scottish NFU was especially interested in prices for oats, barley, sheep, and cattle, and the Ulster Union was likewise for cattle. Another special concern of the Northern Ireland group was to make sure its members received the same prices for products as the rest of the United Kingdom. Thus, all in all, the government appreciated the significance of the farmers’ unions and solicited their advice. Nevertheless, they remained difficult to deal with.

The views of the Central Landowners’ Association, it will be recalled, usually reflected those of the National Farmers’ Union, and like the NFU it moved its offices outside London, in this instance to Coppid Hall near Henley-on-Thames. It accepted the ploughing up campaign and was pleased that ‘agriculture generally have responded to the call’. But even more than the NFU it was displeased with the government’s wages bill. In the opinion of the CLA, this should be a matter to be settled directly between employers and employees, not by the government. The Association was also disturbed that while the Agriculture minister met regularly with the NFU, it was not meeting with the landowners’ group. In March 1940 Dorman-Smith rectified the oversight, and two months later he also invited the CLA to participate in the ministry’s monthly meetings with the NFU and the trade unions. These joint get-togethers continued under the Churchill government.

For the labour unions, the National Union of Agricultural Workers and the agriculture branch of the Transport and General Workers’ Union, their main concern was higher wages. There were other issues they were concerned about, such as working conditions—they were upset, for example, when the Women’s Land Army agreed to Sunday work as part of their regular work week, which the union opposed. They also undertook war measures so that they could continue to conduct business. Although they did not move out of London, the NUAW established a War Emergency Sub-Committee to deal with

57 [CLA], Executive Committee Meeting, 6 Dec. 1939, 28 Feb. 1940, 20 Mar. 1940, and 30 May 1940, AD1/31, IAH, and JCLA, Mar. 1941, 1.
58 NUAW, Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee, 22 Sept. 1939, 17 Nov. 1939, and 16 Feb. 1940; [NUAW], Biennial Conference 1940, 3 May 1940, B/VI/8, IAH; and The Times, 29 Sept. 1939, 5.
urgent problems. Moreover, they were glad to receive increased recognition. Many union members served on War Ag committees and other local entities, and when Edwin Gooch and George Dallas, the heads of the unions, complained in September 1939 about the government not meeting with them, the Agriculture minister responded by setting up regular meetings. In February 1940 union representatives further started meeting with Food ministry subcommittees.

An indication of their increased status can be derived from a dinner of the NUAW at its biennial conference on 3 May 1940. Among those attending, besides Labour’s party leader, Clement Attlee, was Dorman-Smith. His reply to a gracious toast by President Gooch was that inviting a Tory minister to the dinner was ‘a sign of that deep sense of national unity’ which was so vital for the country, and he ended by saying, we are ‘all servants of the soil’. In his presidential address Gooch emphasized that the union supports the war effort, and that ‘we are at last regarded as partners in the industry’. But he could not resist adding, ‘It has taken a war to do it.’

Nevertheless, the union’s primary goal remained better pay. One of the unions’ complaints was that each county wage committee was setting the minimum wage for its area, and therefore there was no uniform rate. At a December meeting Agriculture secretary Ferguson agreed with the unions to seek a Central Wages Board, and, failing that, at least to enable a Central Board to revise the wages set by the county committees. The government, however, accepted a Central Wages Board, and during the negotiations the workers on the board proposed a 60s. (£3) per week minimum. The farmers on the board recommended 42s. (£2.10). The workers moved the figure back to 55s. (£2.75), then to 50s. (£2.50) as a final offer for adult male labourers. They finally agreed to 48s. (£2.40), which was the amount the unions had originally said in private they would accept. Adult women were to receive a 35s. (£1.75) minimum. Even though neither side was completely happy—the union still wanted more for overtime work—it was a rise of approximately 8s. (40p) per week, depending on the region, and both sides were relatively satisfied with the result.

The least critical of the lobby groups were the Women’s Institutes. Their attitude seemed to be, there’s work to be done, let’s get on with it.

59 [NUAW], Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee, 15 Dec. 1939; 31 May 1940; and 14 June 1940, B/I/9, IAH.
60 NFWI, Executive Committee Minutes, 9 Sept. 1939, 743–9; 31 May 1940, 278; and 12 June 1940, 272, NFWI Headquarters; and H & C, June 1940, 127 and 144.
Because of the war, they reduced the length of their magazine, *Home & Country*, and in May 1940 they moved their general office to Abingdon Hall in Dorking. Their activities included helping care for the evacuees; producing more garden vegetables, fruits, poultry and other small animals, and eggs; promoting and demonstrating methods of food preservation; disseminating information through pamphlets, circulars, and radio broadcasts; and keeping up morale in the villages and the countryside. More specifically, these activities took the form of working with local officials to set up Producer Guilds and providing assistance for the Women’s Land Army. The Women’s Institutes further opened numerous market stalls for local produce in the towns—*Home & Country* reported sixteen new ones being constructed in June 1940—and that same month Lady Denman talked to the nation over the BBC about what the Women’s Institutes were doing. As for keeping up morale, T. E. Bray of the Shere and Gomshall WI, perhaps put it best. ‘We dig for victory,’ she wrote, ‘we keep chickens and goats, we knit for the troops, we keep our village merry and bright by handicrafts, music and drama and a hundred and one useful odds and ends.’ In other words, although at times the members of the Women’s Institutes probably did become discouraged, on the whole, their enthusiasm and goodwill provided a positive example for people in rural Britain.

The other lobbies seem to have reacted similarly to the major groups. The Council for the Preservation of Rural England, for instance, set up two offices, one at Hughendon Manor, the other in London.61 It also instituted an Emergency Committee, but in this case it was to handle ‘all matters affecting the CPRE’ and to take the place of general and regular committee meetings. Among its activities, it continued to comment on the government’s acquisition of land for military installations, but the CPRE and its Welsh counterpart were less active during the war than before it.

Thus, by the spring of 1940 the food programme was functioning, not without difficulties at first and not without criticisms, but, on the whole, smoothly. Still one element was missing, and that was a governmental statement on its long-term food policy, and especially as to how that policy would relate to nutrition. Two events resolved the problem. One

61 [CPRE], Emergency Committee Meeting, 12 Sept. 1939, and 10 Feb. 1941, 3 CPRE AI/3, IAH.
was a reshuffling of the cabinet by Chamberlain on 3 April 1940.\(^62\) Although anticipated for months, the changes consisted mainly of moving ministers around within the cabinet. But two of them that were not shuffled related to food and agriculture. One was the appointment of Robert S. Hudson to replace the recently deceased Sir John Gilmour as Minister of Shipping. The other was naming Lord Woolton as Food minister in place of Morrison, who was shifted to the less taxing Postmaster General position.

Woolton (1883–1964) turned out to be a superior appointment.\(^63\) He was the highly successful head of the Lewis’s stores, based in Liverpool, but he had served in the civil service during World War I and had further served as an adviser to various governmental committees in the inter-war years. At the outbreak of the war he was attached to the Ministry of Supply and was directing the procurement of army clothing and textile equipment when Chamberlain asked him in March 1940 to take over as Minister of Food. Woolton recalled his first meeting with the Prime Minister as follows. The Prime Minister asked him to become Food minister. Woolton replied that he would rather not and suggested Colonel J. J. Llewellyn, the permanent secretary in the Ministry of Supply, as an excellent choice, since as an MP he had a better grasp of politics. (He in fact succeeded Woolton in November 1943.) Woolton also said he knew little about food matters. But Chamberlain ‘insisted that this was not a matter of politics—I could remain independent of political parties—but that the country would be pleased to have a businessman in charge of this vital and critical department—and very understandably, in view of my attitude—he pointed out to me that he was paying me the highest compliment’. Woolton said he would think about the offer.

At a subsequent meeting Woolton related that at first their conversation was formal and almost ‘frigid’. But when he told the Prime Minister he agreed to serve, Chamberlain ‘turned in his chair, smiled at me and said, ‘They have always told me you would make any sacrifice for your country: I knew I was right!’’ Woolton admitted he was ‘touched’.

He had been selected primarily because he would bring a business mentality to the ministry and hopefully would gain the confidence of the food industry. He did both.\(^64\) Within a month and a half after his

\(^{62}\) The Times, 4 Apr. 1940, 8–9; FW, 4 Nov. 1939, 13; and WMV, 1 Apr. 1940, 5.

\(^{63}\) Woolton, Memoirs.

appointment, he had had lunch with representatives of the National Federation of Grocers, the Hotel and Restaurant Association, and the Food Manufacturers’ Federation and had enlisted their support. He further gave businessmen more authority within the ministry and named several of them to head departments. But he also overcame the suspicions of the civil servants by meeting with them, visiting every office, and talking with them face to face about their problems. As Woolton put it in his memoirs, ‘So the officials and I began to get to know one another and to understand a common policy and—probably most important of all—I had made the staff feel that we were engaged in a task that was essentially a personal one for the people of this country.’

Another aspect of his job was to deal with the House of Commons. He realized from the beginning that his immediate problem was that as a member of the House of Lords he could not appear before the other body (hence, part of his reluctance to accept the Food ministry position). But with the assistance of his parliamentary secretaries, and after meetings with members of both Houses—at which he acknowledged their right to criticize but also his desire to move ahead for the good of the nation—he experienced few difficulties with them.

Part of his success with parliament can also be explained by another factor: his ‘common touch’ with the people. He had a great gift for public relations, and even though a great deal of his prominence in this area became evident later in the war, as T. O. Lloyd has noted, Woolton ‘left the mark of his personality on the food policy of the whole war’.

The second event of great importance was much more than a reshuffle; it was the resignation of the Chamberlain government on the evening of 10 May 1940 and its replacement with one headed by Winston Churchill. This event, of course, was of profound significance, and it has been examined in great detail elsewhere. (It is also good to remember that that same morning the Battle of France had begun.) But from our perspective Churchill’s government further signalled a change in the attitude if not the direction of the Food and Agriculture

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65 EDP, 4 Apr. 1940, 5, and Woolton, Memoirs, 180–3.
ministries. Regarding Food, the change was not so great, because Woolton was retained. As for Agriculture, however, Dorman-Smith, the farmers’ friend and past president of the National Farmers’ Union, was replaced by Robert Hudson.

The question is, why? Why replace a Conservative—Churchill had kept numerous others—with a civil servant? True, Hudson was proving himself an effective administrator, but he had just been named Minister of Shipping. Since Churchill was adding Labour and Liberal party leaders, why not appoint one of them? But Labour had too radical an agriculture programme, and the Liberals were already heading the important Air ministry. Therefore, they were passed over. The actual reason Hudson took over is that even though Dorman-Smith had represented the interests of the farming community, he had a more traditional view of agriculture instead of the newer, more scientific approach.68 Putting it another way, he was more interested in grain and livestock production than in nutritional considerations. As he once remarked to an NFU deputation, ‘Once we fall into the nutrition trap we are sunk’, and he had argued with the new Prime Minister about their ‘different conclusions’ on several occasions in the months before Churchill took over. Therefore, Dorman-Smith was not surprised to be dismissed, and somewhat surprisingly, he seems not to have borne Churchill any ill will.69

The farm interests were not so charitable.70 They deplored Dorman-Smith’s removal, which one newspaper termed a ‘tragedy’. Columnist Blythe in the Farmer & Stockbreeder probably summed it up best when he wrote, ‘Sir Reginald [was] the only Minister of Agriculture within memory . . . in whom farmers, workers and landowners had trust and confidence’.

Still the farm groups’ displeasure did not turn into outrage in large part because the nation was passing through a war crisis.71 They all agreed to support the new Agriculture minister with the National Farmers’ Union leading the way. On 23 May its Council sent a

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68 Dorman-Smith Papers MSS. Eur E215/32, 3–6, BL, and [MAF], 17 Apr. 1939, MAF 53/134, PRO.
69 Dorman-Smith to Lady Dorman-Smith, 13 June 1944, Dorman-Smith Papers MSS. Eur E215/47, BL. Dorman-Smith became Governor-General of Burma toward the end of 1940 and served in that difficult post until 1946.
70 EDP, 15 May 1940, 7; F & S, ‘With Our United Strength’, 21 May 1940, 1123; and [CLA], Executive Committee Meeting, 6 June 1940, CLA AD1/1/1, IAH.
71 EDP, 15 May 1940, 7; NFU Record, June 1940, 113; and [NFU], ‘Report of General Purposes Committee’, 23 May 1940, AD1/NFU 22, IAH.
telegram to the Prime Minister ‘renewing the assurance of the Union’s whole-hearted support in the present critical state of international affairs’.

Robert Hudson (1886–1957) did not let the farmers down.\(^72\) Within a week, he and his staff met with NFU leaders to discuss common problems and to assure them that he was listening to their concerns. He continued to meet with them regularly and also with representatives of the landowners and the workers’ unions. On Sunday, 2 June he delivered his first nationwide broadcast. He stated that there would be more land put into crops, especially potatoes and vegetables. However, feeding stuffs were to be cut, which he acknowledged would cause difficulties for animal producers, especially pork and poultry farmers. He then proposed raising agricultural wages to 48s. (£2.40) per week minimum, and most importantly, wages were to be linked to prices.

The response was overwhelmingly positive. *The Times*, for instance, stated, ‘The best feature about these pronouncements is that Mr. Hudson took the people fully into his confidence and displayed a welcome sense of urgency and drive in the general scheme of his policy’. Outside London, an editorial in the *Eastern Daily Press* commented: ‘The Minister of Agriculture has made a spectacular debut, and there is no longer any doubt about the Government’s determination to put farming on a war-time basis at all costs’. The *Farmers’ Weekly* was just as fulsome in its praise. ‘In 14 days’, an editorial noted, ‘he has shown a clear-headed appreciation of the [minister’s] position’. His broadcast was ‘not laced with buts and ifs’, but was a frank statement of what was required. In its opinion, Hudson may have come in on a ‘dark horse’, but ‘the dark horse has turned into a runner worth following’.

At the same time Hudson was wooing the agricultural community and conveying to them a series of decisions, he did not forget about the ‘scientific side’ of his job. This took concrete form with the establishment on 28 May of a Scientific Committee that was to advise the government on ways to meet the myriad of problems facing the food and agriculture sectors.\(^73\) This committee was not responsible to the Agriculture ministry, however, but to the Food Policy Committee, which was under the War Cabinet. The Scientific Committee also brought to

\(^{72}\) [MAF], ‘Note of a Deputation from the National Farmers’ Union’, 21 May 1940, MAF 53/134, PRO; Cyclo 25/10, Minutes of Council, 15 Aug. 1940, NFU Minutes 1940, IAH; *WMN*, 9 June 1940, 2; *The Times*, 3 June 1940, 7; *EDP*, 3 June 1940, 4; and *FW*, ‘Action and No Humbug’, 7 June 1940, 1.

\(^{73}\) FP(M)(40), 24 May 1940, CAB 74/2, PRO.
the fore once again the question of a long-term food policy with the idea of nutrition embedded in it. To examine these two issues—food policy and nutrition—is a complicated task, but four main governmental groups were involved. First was the promotional role of a Food Economy Central Committee; second, the work of the Chief Scientific Officer and his staff; third, the contribution of the Scientific Committee; and fourth, the impetus of the Food Policy Committee. The first three groups relate primarily to nutrition and the last to food policy, but an understanding of all four is essential to an understanding of the whole.

The idea of promoting nutrition for the public took many forms, but the government’s interdepartmental Food Economy Central Committee was the main coordinating body. Sir Russell Scott of the Information ministry was the chair, and it included representatives from the Board of Education, Scottish Office, Health, Agriculture, and Food, and an official from Northern Ireland and the Food Ministry’s scientific adviser were also in attendance. In January 1940 the committee decided on a ‘Right Food’ Publicity Campaign, which was to be launched at a public meeting at Queen’s Hall on 5 April. Mrs Chamberlain was to preside, and Food Minister Morrison was among those scheduled to speak. The meeting was to be only the beginning, for it was to be followed by local open meetings across the country, classes on the preservation of fruits, and cooking demonstrations organized by volunteer organizations, such as the Women’s Institutes. The committee further had two leaflets prepared for wide distribution on ‘Our Food Today: How to Eat Wisely in Wartime’ and ‘Housekeeping in Wartime’.

But by the time the Queen’s Hall festivities were to take place, Lord Woolton had become Food minister, and on his first day on the job—4 April—he was informed that he was to address the meeting the next day. Sir Henry French told him not to worry, since he had already prepared a speech, but Woolton was naturally quite nervous about speaking on a subject about which at this point he knew very little. Nevertheless, he gave the speech the next day, and it was a success. Not only did he credit Morrison for establishing the ministry on an ‘excellent foundation’, but he also emphasized eating and conserving the

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74 Food Economic Control Committee (FECC), 1 Jan. 1940; 8 Jan. 1940; and 20 Mar. 1940, MAF 74/19, PRO.
75 Woolton, Memoirs, 170–2; ‘Speech’, 5 Apr. 1940, Woolton Papers 11/68, Bodleian; and WMN, 6 Apr. 1940, 6.
right types of food. He further caught the public’s fancy by using a number of catch phrases, such as women ‘mobilizing themselves on the kitchen front’, and taking ‘one spoonful of tea for each person . . . and none for the pot’. What Woolton and the other speakers were doing, of course, was to heighten people’s awareness of not wasting food and of having a proper diet.

This type of thinking fitted in well with the activities of the Chief Scientific Officer, Professor (soon Sir) Jack Drummond, whose work was the second strand of the food policy–nutrition equation. Although Drummond’s effectiveness was hindered at first by a lack of support (or interest) from the interdepartmental committees, he and his associates still managed to compile data on a number of problems. By the end of April 1940 he had put together his first policy statement and appended to it ‘A Summary of Wartime Nutrition with Special Reference to Home Production of Foods and Import Programmes’. It was a detailed study of the nation’s total caloric and vitamin requirements, and it stressed ‘relying on home production for protective foods and importing calories’. The study highlighted twelve foods that needed to be imported. Cheese, for example, was a valuable source of protein, as was canned fish, which was also rich in Vitamins A and D. As for cereal crops, it recommended increasing the amount imported for 1940–1 by 18 per cent, and decreasing the amount of meat by 42 per cent. With regard to protective, home-produced foods, the study proposed increasing as much as possible the supply of potatoes, garden vegetables (especially green vegetables), milk, and oatmeal. The implication of the study was that adopting these recommendations would lead to a healthy Britain.

Data such as that analysed by Drummond and his staff on nutrition—and they later looked into other issues, such as dehydrated foods, which saved shipping space—were a real boon to the third group, the Scientific Committee, but its establishment in late May 1940 is part of a larger story. It had begun in the 1930s with the work of Sir John Boyd Orr, Charles Orwin, Lord Astor, and others, but it will be recalled that while the government paid attention to their insights, many of their proposals were never acted upon. With the outbreak of the war, however, these agricultural scientists saw their hopes revive that the

government might take a more enlightened view toward food matters. Lord Astor, Orr, Orwin, and Sir Robert Greig, a member of the Commons, were in the forefront, but their problem was that a number of governmental leaders, and especially Dorman-Smith, were not sympathetic to their ideas. One of the ‘progressives’, Sir Frederick Keeble, wrote a letter to Lord Hankey, Dorman-Smith, and Morrison in March 1940 calling for a Food Council to work out a policy that emphasized nutritional concerns with an emphasis on home-produced cereals, milk, potatoes, and vegetables and a reduction in meat. Dorman-Smith’s rebuttal to Hankey, who still had a good deal of influence in the cabinet, was that ‘Keeble does not understand the importance of importing some foods for political reasons’, such as importing eggs from Romania to keep them out of the hands of the Germans. Among other points, Dorman-Smith continued, ‘He [Keeble] seems to think that I have not at my disposal and have not been consulting the leading agricultural scientists, but I have and announced the names last September’.

If that were indeed the case, in the view of Astor, Orr, and others, the Agriculture minister had not asked the right people. They were also aware that ‘the new Minister of Food [Woolton] provided a favourable opportunity for reviewing the problem’. The problem, according to R. Hart-Synott of Oxford, was that ‘there is a widespread criticism by scientists concerned with agriculture that the Government’s schemes for food production are inadequate’. ‘So far,’ he added, ‘little use . . . has been made of their knowledge’.

By mid-April the scientists were getting organized and enlisting the aid of sympathetic members of parliament. At first they advocated two committees, ‘a purely scientific Committee to deal with nutrition and [to] link nutrition to food and shipping’, and a Technical Committee to handle ‘day-to-day problems of supplies, labour, cultivation, etc., and to think ahead’. They then began to suggest names: Orr, Sir Daniel Hall, Keeble, Orwin, Sir John Russell from Rothamstead, some of the younger men from the research stations. By 9 May the scientists and parliamentary supporters were sending a memo to the

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77 Sir Frederick Keeble to Hankey, 19 Mar. 1940, CAB 63/137, PRO, and Dorman-Smith to Hankey, 2 Apr. 1940, CAB 63/137, PRO.
78 R. Hart-Synott, ‘The Food Problem’, 9 Apr. 1940, Astor Papers MS 1066/1/968, URL.
79 Orr to Astor, 16 Apr. 1940, Astor Papers, MS 1066/1/962, URL; Astor, ‘Memorandum for the Meeting . . .’, 18 Apr. 1940, Astor Papers, MS 1066/1/968, URL; and Victor Finney to Lord Astor, 9 May 1940, Astor Papers, MS 1066/1/962, URL.
Minister of Agriculture proposing a Scientific Committee, though not a Technical Committee, and they were further ‘writing out a precise statement of goals’.

Then the governmental changeover intervened. It soon became evident, however, that the efforts of the scientists were paying dividends with the new government. At the weekly informal meeting between Food and Agriculture on 14 May, Fergusson and French naturally focused on the effects of the German invasion of France and the Low Countries on the food supply. Not surprisingly, their conclusion was that it would not be ‘catastrophic’ for agriculture, but ‘food imports were a real concern’.80

The discussion then shifted to the proposed Scientific Committee. In the crucial exchange that followed, Fergusson indicated that ‘the Agriculture Departments would not object to such a committee so long as its terms of reference were restricted to nutrition and scientific aspects of the matter, but they were definitely opposed to extending the terms of reference to include a consideration of agriculture policy’. The latter, he pointed out, was connected to issues (foreign policy, economic warfare, etc.) ‘upon which nutritionists and scientists were not competent to advise’. Fergusson then added he felt ‘that the recommendations might seriously embarrass the Ministry . . . and further that the Treasury might also be placed in a difficult position in so far as a Committee of Scientists was almost certain to make very strong recommendations for the subsidisation [sic] of food for the poorer consumers’. French’s classic rejoinder was as follows: ‘[He] said if it was necessary to have a Scientific Committee the sooner it was appointed the better. His Minister [Woolton] held the view most strongly that the Government would not be able to justify a food policy prepared mainly by the bureaucracy and that there was a case for the setting up of a Scientific Committee.’81 Then to mollify Fergusson, French said it would, of course, be necessary to have the Agriculture ministry oversee any recommendations the Scientific Committee might make regarding agriculture policy.

But the issue had been aired. Only the outcome was in doubt. Woolton and French favoured a Scientific Committee. Fergusson, taking the traditional Agriculture line, did not. The key person was the new Agriculture minister, Robert Hudson. Astor talked to him and Woolton and Robert Boothby, the new parliamentary secretary and at

80 FP 29, 14 May 1940, MAF 53/146, PRO.  
81 Ibid.
this point a close confidant of Churchill. Astor ascertained that Woolton and Boothby were favourably disposed toward his thinking, but he feared that ‘Hudson, coming entirely new to the agricultural world, is too much obsessed with the need of obtaining the good will of the NFU’.

Astor need not have been apprehensive, however, for at a meeting of the Food Policy Committee on 24 May Hudson went along with the Committee’s decision to set up a Scientific Committee. Sir William Bragg, the President of the Royal Agricultural Society, was to be the chair, and the Committee was to include Orr and other scientists among its members. On the 28th it had its first meeting. One day earlier, after meeting with Hudson, MP Greig wrote to Astor: ‘Mr. Hudson gave me the impression that he was more alive to the [food policy] situation than his predecessor was.’ Astor soon felt the same way.

By early June the public had been informed of the existence of the Scientific Committee, and it generally approved. As expressed in a 5 June editorial in the Eastern Daily Press, ‘Vigorous action, founded on expert advice, will bring farming and food to their best. Thus from the war at least these benefits may come: a prosperous agriculture and a nation educated in nutrition.’

During June the Committee set to work, though it did have to overcome distractions and a potential problem. Besides the war, which was a major distraction in itself, the other difficulty was that the Food ministry moved most of its offices from London to Colwyn Bay, a seaside resort in northern Wales. The only announcement in the press was that the ‘evacuation of the staff of the Ministry of Food’ was under way ‘to a secret country site’. During the last week in June the move was accomplished, although a number of civil servants remained behind in London. Some of the divisions also relocated to other places, including, among others, the Potato Division to Oxford, the Canned Fish Division to Liverpool, and the Liquid Milk Division to Thames Ditton in Surrey.

The potential problem for the Scientific Committee was that Drummond’s Scientific branch might not prove cooperative, but that, in fact, did not happen. Instead, Drummond and his workers assisted the

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82 Lord Astor to Sir Robert Greig, 22 May 1940, Astor Papers, MS 1066/1/961, URL.
83 FP(M)(40), 14th Meeting, 24 May 1940, CAB 74/2, PRO, and Greig to Astor, 27 May 1940, Astor Papers, MS 1066/1/970, URL.
84 EDP, 5 June 1940, 4.
85 The Times, 26 June 4, and Hammond, Food, i. 59–61.
86 J. C. Drummond, [Note], 21 June 1940, MAF 98/254, PRO, and Sir John Boyd Orr to Lord Woolton, 24 July 1940, MAF 98/254, PRO.
committee by giving it information, and the members of the committee reciprocated by sharing their research with Drummond. The reason was not only because Drummond was part of the Food ministry, which strongly approved of the Scientific Committee, but also because he agreed with its nutritional emphasis.

On 28 June, a month after its inception, the Committee issued its first report, ‘A “Basal Diet” as the Foundation of Food Policy’. It began by stating that the committee realized the war situation had become desperate and that ‘widespread devastation by air raids and invasion’ might well be in the offing. Nevertheless, the committee was basing its report on the premise that the country would survive, and that the war would continue for a long time. It had used this premise to draw up a list of foods in order of priority determined by physiological needs, by the possibilities of extensive home production and in the case of imported goods by shortness and convenience of shipping routes, compactness and least call on foreign exchange’. Those foods that had the highest priority were called a ‘basal diet’, and they included bread, fats (margarine, butter, and cooking fats), milk, potatoes, oatmeal, and vegetables. Eight secondary foods were placed in a supplementary list, and it included cheese, dried beans and peas, meat and fish (especially tinned), cereals (other than wheat and oats), bacon, sugar, eggs, and dried fruit (since many types of fresh fruit might not be available). The committee recommended that the basal diet make up 2,000 calories per person per day, and that the supplementary list make up 800 calories. The 2,800 calories were considered ‘sufficient to meet the energy requirements of people not engaged in manual labour’. The report then went into how much each person needed to consume each day on average of the six basic foods to reach 2,000 calories—12 ounces of bread, 16 ounces of potatoes, just over half a pint of milk, and so forth. The final section dealt with communal feeding, such as for factories and schools. The entire report was sent to the Food Policy Committee for consideration.

The Scientific Committee followed its initial report with a number of others on such topics as whether the wartime situation warranted rationing bread—the committee thought not—and how to maintain sufficient domestic milk production in light of possible bombing attacks—the committee had no immediate solution. But after July

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87 FP(M)[40]91, ‘First Report by the Scientific Sub-Committee’, 28 June 1940, CAB 74/4, PRO.
88 [MF], ‘Memorandum on Policy . . .’, 28 June 1940, MAF 98/254, PRO; MAF, 17 July
the Food ministry started making suggestions on technical matters the committee might examine. These included looking into methods of preserving fresh vegetables at minimum cost without losing their nutritional value and ways to make oats and oatmeal more palatable with minimum use of fuel for cooking. Although food officials had been considering these issues for some time, they hoped the committee could assist them in finding solutions.

Thus the Scientific Committee had found useful work (though it faded from the scene by 1942). But its report on nutrition and the work of the Scientific adviser’s office were still only part of what Woolton and the Churchill government wanted: a long-term food policy. Woolton had already made this point soon after taking office, and this is where the fourth group, the Food Policy Committee, enters the picture. In the new government, Labour leader Attlee had become chair of the committee, and while the members continued to discuss immediate issues, such as milk for children and expectant mothers and prices of agricultural products, one of its main concerns was setting forth a food policy.

Woolton’s ministry did the spade work. Its Economics Division examined the Scientific Committee’s report and ‘generally agreed’ with its conclusions. (Official historian Murray was secretary of the Economics Division.) However, the report alone was insufficient, and so the completed draft was much more comprehensive. On 31 July a memorandum, ‘Policy of the Ministry of Food’, was forwarded to the Food Policy Committee, which turned it over to the War Cabinet, and it was approved on 7 August.

It is a relatively straightforward document. It began by stating, ‘The function of the Ministry of Food is to feed the people of this country and to feed them in such a manner that they can get on with their job of national service’. It then described the methods and factors involved. The ministry was to prescribe what was to be produced at home and what imported. It was to oversee rationing and price controls, but only in so far as necessary. It was to be concerned with food

1940, MAF 98/254, PRO; and Dr Clayton to Sir Quinton Hill, 1 Oct. 1940, MAF 98/254, PRO.


91 ‘Policy of the Ministry of Food’, and FP[M](40)127, ‘Policy of the Ministry of Food’, 21 Aug. 1940, CAB 74/4, PRO.
distribution, building up and conserving food supplies, and educating the public on the best value of the food available. As for luxury foods, they should be allowed to find their own price levels. Finally, the document stated that both the home production and the import policies were to emphasize ‘the findings of the Scientific Committee’ regarding a basal diet. But then with a nod to what a basal diet really meant, it said that ‘in addition to these foods essential to physical health, adequate provision should also be made of the foods essential to the general contentment of the public’. In other words, a strict basal diet would not have a lot of flavour.

Yet the final piece of the programme, a statement on food policy, was now in place. Its completion gives rise to a number of observations. First, as noted earlier, almost all of the measures called for—setting home production and import quotas, handling rationing and price controls, etc.—were already being carried out by the Food ministry. Nevertheless, it was good to have them spelled out and to be reminded that the ministry’s objective was ‘to feed the people’ in time of war.

The statement also makes clear, if it were not already obvious, that the Food ministry was the dominant body running the food programme, and Agriculture was secondary. To be sure, the policy statement refers only to the Food ministry, but the latter still determined home production quotas and prices for farm goods, and the other major functions of the Agriculture ministry—providing labour and horse and machine power—depended on food production. While the government continued to try to meet the farmers’ complaints, and to an extent, their expectations, their interests were secondary to feeding the nation, for which the Food ministry was primarily responsible.

A third observation is that while Woolton and the Churchill government served as catalysts in bringing into being a food policy statement, the government was already moving in that direction, particularly in terms of nutrition, at the time Woolton and Hudson took office. This involvement had taken the form of a publicity campaign and the work of the scientific adviser and his staff. But the question still remains, would Morrison and Dorman-Smith ever have pushed for a policy statement on their own? They had been aware of the issues for years, but had never seen fit to adopt one. True, their top civil servants were also negligent in this regard. Nevertheless, without Woolton and the Churchill government appointees such a statement might never have come into being, or at least would have been delayed even further.
Finally, one is forced to conclude that in this instance there were too many governmental committees. The ones that were responsible—first the Food Sub-Committee before the war, and then its successor, the Food Policy Sub-Committee, after the war started—never ordered the Food ministry to draft a broad statement, and so a number of other committees and offices, including the Scientific Committee, became involved. The problem was that given the crush of events, no one in the government, until Woolton, was willing to take the initiative to see that the necessary time and energy were devoted to set forth a food policy statement. But by August 1940 it was finally accomplished.

It may seem odd to end this study, except for an epilogue, at the early stage of the Battle of Britain, perhaps the country’s most trying time during the entire conflict. But in this case the interrelationship between food, agriculture, and preparations for war, it makes sense. For even though it took the government eleven months to have the entire programme worked out, it was functioning adequately before that terrible spring and summer of 1940. True, during the first months of the war, the preparations worked out beforehand had to be adjusted, and in at least one instance, the fish control plan, it had to be abandoned and another put in its place. All in all, however, the preparatory planning was sound, and it allowed the government to establish a solid foundation. By the time it faced its severest test in 1940–1, it was able to meet the challenge in supplying food for the nation.

Hammond, *Food and Agriculture*, 19.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Epilogue and Conclusion

The feeding of the population is a vital problem of the war.

J. Henderson Stewart, MP

Although after August 1940 Britain’s food programme was still subject to numerous adjustments, by this time in the war the direction had been set. Nevertheless, it is important to note how the measures that were put in place early on worked out during the rest of the conflict and in most instances continued afterward; for what occurred before and during the war set the stage for the agricultural revolution in production that followed.

Without going into detail, one approach for understanding this phenomenon is again through the use of facts and figures. These in turn can be applied to the following areas of the government’s food programme: domestic crop and livestock production, food imports, farmer income and labour wages, government land policies, the food supply, rationing, the nation’s diet, and the innovative National Land Survey. A brief examination of each of these areas should sharpen our appreciation of the continuity between the 1930s and what happened during the post-war years.

Regarding domestic crop and livestock production, as a result of the ploughing-up campaign, the amount of land under cultivation and in temporary grassland increased from 12.9 million acres in 1939 to 19.8 million in 1944.1 During the same period the number of acres in permanent grass decreased from 18.8 million acres to 11.7 million. In other words, while the amount of land being used for farming remained

about the same—31.7 million acres in 1939 as compared with 31.0 million in 1944—cropland had increased and pastureland decreased.

The results can be seen in individual products. The amount of wheat produced, for example, rose from 1,645,000 tons in 1939 to 3,138,000 tons in 1944, or an increase of 91 per cent, and that of oats rose 47 per cent, potatoes 91 per cent, and vegetables 43 per cent. At the same time, while the number of beef and dairy cattle in Britain remained about the same—8.9 million in 1939 as compared with 9.5 million in 1944, or an increase of 7 per cent—the number of sheep decreased 26 per cent, pigs 57 per cent, and poultry 22 per cent. Putting it another way, the percentage of income farmers derived from livestock fell from 71 per cent before the war to 50 per cent in 1943–4, while the percentage from crops rose from 15 per cent to 30 per cent during the same period.

What these changes signified, among other things, was an increase in the percentage of home-produced food based on calories from about 33 per cent in the pre-war years to 44 per cent at its peak in 1944. This meant that the country was able to feed itself with its own food approximately 160 days per year instead of only 120 days at the war’s outset. Yet, most of the quantitative increase, as Martin has shown, was not, as once thought, because of better farming practices, but rather because more acres were simply being put into cultivation than previously.

A related area is food imports. In this instance the numbers are equally impressive. The amount of imported food was cut in half, from 22 million tons before the war to 11 million tons in 1944. Part of the reason was the increase in home production, but part of it was also because new, more compact goods, such as dried milk and dried eggs, and alternative products, such as canned meat and processed milk, saved shipping space. In addition, the government made a deliberate effort to cut down on imported animal feed, which dropped from 8.7 million tons in 1936–8 to 1.3 million tons in 1943–4, and it also decreased the amount of imported bulky foods, such as fresh fruit and vegetables.

Among Britain’s trading partners, commerce with the United States expanded. The cost was a modification of imperial preference, which to a limited extent assisted American trade with the Commonwealth and Empire, a long-term US objective. But the benefit was more


3 Callum A. MacDonald, The United States, Britain and Appeasement, 1936–1939 (London,
Anglo-American trade and more combined planning, which became institutionalized in the food area in the Combined Food Board. At its zenith the board had under it twenty-one standing commodity committees that dealt with everything from fish and cocoa to vitamins and fertilizers, and its commercial involvement with fifty different countries promoted efficient buying and helped secure essential supplies for Great Britain.

Another ongoing concern for the government was to raise the income for farmers and wages for farm workers, but not so much as to fuel excessive inflation.4 Despite complaints from the NFU in 1940–1, the Food ministry accomplished this goal by continuing to control the market price for essential food products and by holding down retail prices through subsidies. As a consequence, the average farm income rose from £160 before the war to £540 after it, and government subsidies for food (and this figure excludes direct payments to farmers for additional crop acreage and improvements) totalled £15.9 million in 1939–40, but jumped to £195.7 million in 1944–5. It is little wonder that historian Peter Howlett has concluded that farmers ‘benefited far more than any other group from the war’.

Farm labourers did not do so well, but they still did much better than before the war.5 Before it was over the minimum for adult men reached 70s. (£3.50) per week, nearly double what it had been in 1939, and the minimum for women workers reached 45s. (£2.25) in 1943, and was undoubtedly higher by war’s end. Moreover, the Agriculture ministry continued to deal with the labour problem in creative ways. By 1943–4 not only were there labourers from nearby villages, farmers on furlough, members of the Women’s Land Army, and conscientious objectors, but there were also other groups involved, such as people from the cities on holiday, prisoners of war and Jewish refugees, and


other European volunteer workers. Finally, 203,000 tractors were in use by 1946, nearly four times as many as in 1939, and the increase in mechanization was an obvious boon to the farming community.

While the government had long been an owner of farmland—for research and demonstration purposes, from some cooperative ventures, and as a hangover from earlier times—its wartime policies added considerably to its holdings. For one thing, it took over about 800,000 acres for airfields. For another, it will be recalled that the county committees were to take over derelict or improperly farmed land. By 1944 this amounted to 390,000 acres, and the government thus found itself in the farming business. Although some of the evictions were warranted, in other instances the authorities acted in a high-handed manner, as in the case of Mr George Walden, who owned a small dairy farm (around fifty acres) in Hampshire. When he continued to refuse to plough a four-acre field for crops, the police ordered him to leave his farmstead. But when they arrived, he shot and wounded one of them, and they entered the house and killed him. On another occasion, Mr John Crowe, also from Hampshire, was evicted because he continued to produce milk rather than wheat as ordered. This time, however, there was no shooting. After the war, the War Agrs turned ‘their’ property over to a National Agriculture Advisory Service.

All of the above factors related to the food supply. Despite all the wartime difficulties through which the government was navigating and the alterations in trading partners and in the nation’s diet, in March 1942 Conservative Clement Davies declared before parliament that ‘there has been no real shortage in food’. Three months later Lord Woolton reported to an all-party parliament the same message: all is well, and unless we suffer the loss of such places as India, Ceylon, and Australia, we are ‘in a reasonably good food position for some months to come’. This position continued for the rest of the war—to be sure, there were shortages at times and other inconveniences—but still enough food to feed the nation.

The most talked-about inconvenience, besides the interminable ‘queuing up’, was rationing. As discussed earlier, it had begun in

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7 378 HC Deb., 1941–2, col. 555, 3 Mar. 1942, and Sir George Harvie-Watt Papers, Report by Parliamentary Private Secretary, 12 June 1942, HARY 2/1, CAC.
January 1940 with sugar, butter, bacon, and ham, and the list had been expanded to include at first meat, margarine, cooking fats and tea, and then other items, such as cheese, sweets, and preserves, as the war dragged on. The alternative points system had been introduced in December 1941. In this instance, each person was allotted so many points per week to use on canned meat and fish, breakfast cereal, biscuits, tapioca, and the like. The number of points per item was adjusted according to availability. Woolton thought the points system made homemakers feel they were ‘shopping’ instead of merely ‘collecting the rations’. But rationing did wear thin on the war-weary populace, since most food was subject to some type of control after 1941. Rationing became more unpopular than ever when it continued after the war. At one point the government even rationed bread because of a worldwide shortage of wheat, and potatoes because of a failure of the potato crop in 1947–8. The programme was not phased out entirely until 1954, when the rationing of butter, margarine, and meat was finally removed from the list.

The other main inconvenience was the diet. Although persons inside and outside the government had worked diligently to get a nutritious diet accepted as an integral part of the nation’s food policy, and had finally succeeded in August 1940, anyone living at the time would tell you it was monotonous and did not taste very good. As official historian Hammond has charitably written, it ‘left a good deal to be desired aesthetically’.

On the other hand, the diet was to provide 2,200 calories of nutritious food per day, down from about 3,000 calories before the war, but still sufficient to get by, and the government did everything it could to make the diet sound palatable. It promoted various recipes, for example, such as one for Spanish Omelette (using dried eggs) and another for Savoury Scones (substituting oatmeal for some of the flour). The best-known recipe was the one for Woolton Pie. It included one pound each of potatoes, cauliflower, swedes, and carrots, but ‘you could add turnips too’. They were to be boiled and strained, but about three-quarters of a pint of the vegetable water was to be kept. The vegetables were to be arranged in a large pie dish or casserole. A little vegetable extract and one ounce of oatmeal were to be added to the vegetable

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9 Whetham, British Farming, 94; Hammond, Food and Agriculture, 231; Marguerite Patten, We’ll Eat Again: A Collection of Recipes from the War Years (London, 1985), 67 and 102; and Woolton, Memoirs, 247.
liquid, which was cooked until it thickened and then was poured over
the vegetables. Three to four chopped spring onions were to be added.
The pie was then to be topped with mashed potatoes and ‘a very little
cheese’ and heated in the centre of a moderately hot oven until golden
brown. It was to be served with gravy. Even Lord Woolton admitted,
though it looked like steak and kidney pie, it was a pie ‘without the steak
and kidney’!

The most innovative governmental measure related to agriculture
was the National Land Survey, initiated in 1941. It was a comprehensive
record of the conditions of farms, though not all those in Scotland
or Northern Ireland were surveyed. In completing it, War Ag person-
nel determined, among other things, what was grown and produced
on each farm, the quality and condition of the land, the condition of
the buildings and property, and the competence of the farmer. The
farms were then given A, B, or C ratings. Those with a C rating were
suspect and subject to more scrutiny by the county committees than
the other two categories. What the survey did—a summary as pub-
lished in 1946—was to target inefficient farmers and help improve
farming standards. It also provided a detailed record of the nation’s
farms which proved useful for planning after the war.

Also after the war, the government, in this instance a Labour gov-
ernment, made good on its wartime promise not to let the farming
community down, as the latter felt had been the case after World
War I. The result was the landmark Agriculture Act of 1947, which
extended the farmers’ security through guaranteed prices, set annu-
ally, and generous subsidies, which helped promote efficiency. It was
also passed because of the prospect of a worldwide shortage of food and
to help ease the foreign exchange problem. The bill was followed in
1948 by an Agriculture Wages Act, which set the minimum for full-time
male workers at 80s. (\£4) for a 48-hour work week.

What these two acts signified can once more be seen in some basic
figures. The amount of arable land remained about the same as to-
ward the end of the war, but when compared with the pre-war average,
it was 4.9 million acres higher—17.6 million in 1956–7 as against 12.9 million in 1938–9. Increased acreage plus better farming practices led to notable gains in both grain and livestock production, so that by the mid-1950s total production was approximately 50 per cent higher than before the war, and the rise came about despite a decline in workers by about one-third. Government subsidies also played a part. They continued to rise after the war from £195.7 million in 1944–5 to around £250 million annually during the late 1950s. As a consequence, farm income rose dramatically, from an average of around £160 in 1939 to £785 in 1952, or about five times higher than before the war. An indication of increased efficiency is in the number of tractors, which increased from 203,000 in 1945 to 313,000 in 1951. By the late 1950s the country was producing roughly half of its own food, and this trend toward national self-sufficiency continued in subsequent decades. Although one might question whether the government’s agriculture programme, which was expensive and not especially environmentally friendly, was justified except for security reasons, farming interests had finally received what they wanted: relative prosperity for the farmer. But whether or not one agrees with the methods used to achieve prosperity, they had their genesis in the 1930s and World War II.

In our study of British food, agriculture, and rearmament during the 1930s, we have emphasized four interrelated themes. First of all, food and agriculture became closely linked to rearmament in 1936, and this linkage dominated the relationship during the rest of the pre-war years. In the background was the World War I experience, during which the government had eventually taken control of the food and agricultural sectors. During the 1920s the wartime mechanism was dismantled, except for the Civil Emergency Food Organisation housed in the Board of Trade, and only occasionally did governmental committees even mention the food–war relationship.

During the early 1930s the country was primarily involved with the Depression, but even at this time the international threat was raising its head. By 1935 it had emerged as a major concern, and this concern, prodded by parliament and the public, prompted the Board of Trade’s Food Supply in Time of War Sub-Committee to issue a series of reports in April 1936. These reports, in effect, identified food and agriculture as two of the essential components in preparing the country for war.

During the remainder of 1936 and into 1939 the government forged ahead. The Agriculture ministry was told to start preparing for the
eventuality of war. Its officials had already begun the planning process, and it took further steps to set up local committees, raise home production, supply adequate farm labour, and increase mechanization should that prove necessary. The Agriculture Acts of 1937 and 1939 addressed these issues, and added to it provisions for better farming practices, such as grants for drainage and raising the number of local veterinary inspectors. At the same time, the government formed a rationing committee, headed by Sir William Beveridge, and a food reserves storage committee, chaired by Sir Ernest Gowers, to handle these issues, although in the latter case it took nearly two years for a food storage programme to be realized.

Most importantly, in November 1936 the Food (Defence Plans) Department as part of the Board of Trade came into being. Should war break out, it was to become a Ministry of Food, again harking back to First World War precedents with plans for a central headquarters in London and for an extensive local organization. Its functions were to include food imports, distribution within the country (in concert with Ministry of Transport), commodity control schemes for the major products, evacuation procedures, food for the armed services, and price controls along with provisions for rationing and storage. Planning for these matters was helped by the fact that besides an increase in personnel, Food (Defence Plans) required little additional funding at this stage. On the other hand, the military build-up required huge outlays of capital if it were to succeed against a rapidly rearming Germany, and possibly against Italy and Japan as well. Despite the minimal cost, by the summer of 1939 the government had made considerable progress in readying the food and agricultural sectors for their wartime tasks.

This brings us to our second theme, which is, that the government’s preparations in food and agriculture were relatively well advanced when the war broke out. Proof of this contention can be seen in the government’s response to the war between September 1939 and August 1940, when the formation and direction of the food programme took definite shape. The plans undertaken by the Agriculture ministry worked out exceedingly well. Although there was grumbling from farmers, the ploughing up campaign to raise domestic production, and its ancillary, the dig for victory campaign to increase garden production, both succeeded, as did the measures to provide adequate labour and to increase farm mechanization.

The Food ministry’s record was more uneven, but still impressive. Despite problems here and there, the procedures for commodity
control schemes, evacuations, food distribution, storage, and armed forces provisioning seemed to function well from the start. After initial difficulties, the programmes for imports, rationing, and price controls also ran adequately if not always smoothly by the spring of 1940. The one area both ministries had neglected was a long-term food policy that took into account the country’s nutritional needs. Not until August did it officially become part of the government’s food programme, though it had been discussed in governmental and non-governmental circles for a number of years. With its inclusion, and the rest of the food control policy now on a solid foundation, the government was able to handle the myriad of problems in the food area that arose throughout the remainder of the war.

The third theme is that rural and farm interests well understood what war would mean to them and their way of life. Their understanding had two different aspects. Not only were they informed about what to expect through a variety of means, including wireless broadcasts, word of mouth, national and local newspapers, farmer weeklies, and lobby groups’ journals. But they also at times exerted influence on the government through letters written directly to officials and also to the media and through the activities of the agricultural lobbies. In the last case, the National Farmers’ Union was particularly influential, but the Central Landowners’ Association, National Union of Agricultural Workers, and Women’s Institutes were also consulted as were prominent business leaders and trade associations in the food sector. The conclusion is that despite the hierarchical nature of British society, those living in the countryside or involved with rural issues knew, if they were willing to listen, what the government was doing in relation to their vested interests. Moreover, as one should expect in a democracy, the rural community had some say in making sure that their interests were given due consideration.

The fourth and final theme we have developed has been to show that instead of concentrating almost solely on foreign, military, industrial, and political concerns when one examines 1930s Britain, the role of food and agriculture also needs to be appreciated and taken into account. It is interesting to note that all the prime ministers of the period—from Baldwin to Chamberlain and even including Churchill—were well versed in food and agricultural matters and realized their importance as the country prepared for and went to war. It is further of interest that there was a good deal of continuity among those who shaped the government’s food policy. Addison, Gilmour, Elliot,
Morrison, and French were on board or involved throughout the period, even though their influence, except for that of French, waned within months after the war started, and Woolton and Hudson took over. Nevertheless, their contribution of linking food and agriculture to rearmament should not be overlooked.

Nor should one lose sight of how pervasive agriculture and especially food were to the entire citizenry. Though overstated, J. Henderson Stewart, an MP from Fife, perhaps put it best when he told the Commons soon after the outbreak of war that ‘the feeding of the population is a vital problem of the war’, and that it was possibly equal ‘to the very strategy of war itself’. What Stewart was saying was that during wartime food, and the other necessities, should always be a fundamental concern. To Britain’s credit, the government, with public backing, appreciated that fact and undertook measures during the 1930s to prepare the nation for the reality of war in food and agriculture. One might add, at the risk of over-generalization, that whether in wartime or peacetime, governments always need to be concerned about food and agriculture, since they are basic to a nation’s existence.

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