

**HOW WILL FREE TRADE IN CORN
AFFECT THE FARMER? BEING AN
EXAMINATION OF THE EFFECTS
OF CORN LAWS UPON BRITISH
AGRICULTURE**

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How will free trade in corn affect the farmer? Being an examination of the effects of corn laws upon British agriculture by Richard Griffiths Welford

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RICHARD GRIFFITHS WELFORD

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CORN LAWS UPON BRITISH AGRICULTURE.

BY
RICHARD GRIFFITHS WELFORD, ESQ.,

MEMBER OF THE ROYAL AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY OF ENGLAND.

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P R E F A C E.

It is not now necessary to preface such an inquiry, as that I propose to institute into the operation of the Corn Laws on Agriculture, by any preliminary dissertation on the principles of free trade. Since 1820, when the merchants of London presented by their organ, Mr. Alexander Baring (now Lord Ashburton), their memorable petition in favour of free trade, those principles have, with more or less of timidity and reservation, been acted upon by every successive administration. The late ministry, that of Lord Melbourne, in the last days of its political existence, gave in its unqualified adhesion to the doctrines of free trade; and the same doctrines have been subsequently propounded, with great distinctness and ability, by Sir Robert Peel and Mr. Gladstone, as the general rule which must henceforth regulate our commercial legislation.

Such, then, being the rule, the advocates of the corn laws must make out special and peculiar grounds for excepting corn from the ordinary law: whether they have established such grounds is one of the objects of the following pages to inquire.

I also propose to inquire, whether the owners or occupiers of land have really obtained the advantages they expected from a system of restriction, confessedly injurious to all other classes of the community.

The conclusion, in favour of an entirely free trade in corn, at which I have arrived, is the result of no bias towards commercial as distinguished from agricultural occupations, for early training and present tastes lead me altogether to sympathise with agricultural pursuits. Neither have my opportunities of observation been scanty; first, in the office of my father, who as a country attorney was also extensively employed as a land-agent; and subsequently, during several years of experience acquired by my own practice in the same professions, previously to my being called to the bar, I have seen the effects of some of the great fluctuations of price upon the interests of both landlords and farmers.

Hence, many years ago, I became firmly con-

vinced of the injurious operation of the corn laws; and amongst the numerous landowners and agriculturists, whom business connections, family ties, and personal intimacies, rendered for several years almost exclusively my associates, I never hesitated to avow and defend my opinions in favour of free trade, or to point out the absurdities and the wrongs occasioned by the corn laws. I have thus been constantly subject to that sort of authoritative refutation, which practical farmers once thought so conclusive, and that by arguments and calculations very similar to those in favour of restriction, which are profusely scattered through the evidence offered to the various committees on agricultural distress, and which I have now attempted to sift. These arguments may be all resolved into statements of isolated facts, only accurate under the actually existing circumstances; or, into an assumed necessity for continuing a system, which had grown out of the extraordinary period of the late war, after things had reverted to a more natural condition. This naturally led to a close scrutiny of one's own views, and a strict examination of the facts and circumstances so confidently urged to prove them untenable. In every case the efficacy of corn laws to secure high prices was

assumed to be incontestible, while the most ridiculous exaggerations of the cheapness and abundance of corn in the north of Europe were treated as incapable of disproof. For the *bread-eaters* there was then little pretence of sympathy.

At present, also, I have, as a practical farmer, a direct and lively interest in the prosperity of English agriculture. Therefore, although study and observation, resulting from a practical acquaintance of some years standing with the management of landed property, and with the ordinary relations of landlord and tenant, have convinced me of the impolicy of *all* restrictions on the trade in foreign corn, and of the absolute futility of all the arguments, by which the advocates of the corn laws have endeavoured to justify those restrictions, I cannot be suspected of entering upon the present examination with any bias adverse to the agricultural interest.

R. G. W.

Northaw, Herts, March, 1843.