

1536/9, though in few if any cases did the Spencers purchase an ecclesiastical estate direct from the Crown. Thus, selecting examples from Fig. 4, which records the growth of holdings, the manor of Byfield (purchased in 1557) had belonged to Sheen Priory, the manor of Wicken (1588) to Snelshall, and those of Priors Marston (1602) and Priors Hardwick (1633) to Coventry. The wealth of the Spencers also enabled them to make good marriages among important families, and in due course the estate was wisely entailed so that successive father and eldest son of the main line had only a life-tenancy. In consequence the estate remained a remarkably stable entity for long periods of time. Although a great deal of the wealth of the early Spencers was vested in land, a very large proportion was also held as stock on their pastures. Indeed, the holdings shown on Fig. 4 constituted an enormous, closely integrated stock farm organized around two main centres, Wormleighton and Althorp. Wormleighton, with its great enclosed pastures and many small pens and folds, was the main centre for livestock, whereas Althorp, with a great park soon to be added, became the principal residence, though still functioning as a secondary stock centre. Apart from a large white stone monument to John, son and heir of Sir Robert Spencer, who died in 1610, the lack of Spencer tombs in the old church at Wormleighton is an eloquent reminder that the main domestic life of the family was centred elsewhere, namely at Althorp with a mortuary chapel in the church at Brington. Local hearsay still maintains that up to 20,000 sheep were grazed on the Spencer estates during the sixteenth century, and it is interesting to find that Dr. Finch's analysis of the shepherds' accounts shows a total flock of about 14,000 sheep in May/June 1568 and again in October 1576. Of this total about 10,500 sheep and lambs appear to have been kept on the pastures peripheral to Wormleighton and between 3,000 and 3,500 on those around Althorp.¹

We are fortunate in having an account of the manor of Wormleighton in 1554 which shows that it comprised '21 messuages, 21 tofts, a dovecot, 21 gardens, 1,100 acres land (arable land), 560 acres meadow, 2,500 acres pasture, 240 acres wood, 20 acres land covered with water and 540 acres heath'.² Compared with the present parish acreage (2,451) this amounted to no less than 4,960 acres in 1554. Even allowing for variations in the size of an acre between then and now it is clear that the manor of Wormleighton so described was a larger unit than the present parish, no doubt including the whole of Stoneton, part of Fenny Compton, as well as Watergall and Wills Pastures. The large amount of pasture does not surprise us, nor the 540 acres of heath which probably lay partly on the dry hills of the Middle Lias Marlstone and partly on the damp tracts of Watergall, but the reference to as much as 1,100 acres of arable land is unexpected. A large proportion of this arable area was probably in Fenny Compton, which, as will be seen later, was not enclosed until as late as 1778/9; the growth of population in Wormleighton, too, had no doubt required an extension in its arable acreage. The coincidence in the numbers of messuages, tofts, and gardens suggests that the grant referred simply to 21 homesteads with their adjoining plots of land. The large amount of meadow is to be expected, and the 20 acres of water would be approximately covered by the fishponds,

¹ M. E. Finch, Appendix I, Tables E and F.

² *Calendar of Patent Rolls: Philip and Mary, 1559-4*, p. 265.