

those of Lutterworth, appear to have been on a small scale only and the pattern established by Sir John Spencer I of selling the bulk in the profitable London market seems to have persisted through to the first quarter of the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> One would like to know more about the arrangements by which stock were driven south for delivery to London butchers. For example, were the animals handed over to butcher-graziers on the outskirts of London to spend a period in fattening pastures before slaughter, or did they go direct to the butcher after a journey of 100 miles by easy stages? As we have seen already, the Spencers were also willing to sell sheep to stock the estates of other great landowners, and in due course they acquired a reputation for the quality of their animals. We do not know the type or types of sheep that the Spencers favoured, but by careful selection and good feeding it is clear that they had built up breeding stock better than most. Sales of breeding ewes and rams were made not only to their relatives and to important local families, but also to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, in 1576 and to Thomas, Lord Burghley, in 1602.<sup>2</sup> Thus the influence of the Spencers on the establishment and improvement of some early breeds may have been considerable. Finally, in view of what has been described above, one might reasonably claim that many of the distinctive patterns etched on the lost-village site of Wormleighton (Plate 6) are the result of vigorous and long-continued post-depopulation pastoral activity.

#### THE PERIOD OF LEASING OF SPENCER LAND

In the previous two sections we have seen how the Spencers used wealth gained from the leasing of great blocks of land to purchase large estates which were not dissipated like those of many other great families. The early profits that they derived from wool and meat were devoted to wise investment in land, which in turn supported further increases in their flocks and herds. Increase in wealth was matched by that in social status, for by 1603 Sir Robert Spencer had become Baron Spencer of Wormleighton, and in 1643 Henry Spencer, the third Baron Spencer, was created Earl of Sunderland. Commenting on the meteoric rise of the Spencers from humble graziers to a leading titled family within the short space of a century, J. H. Round has rightly emphasized that they owed their success 'neither to the favour of a court, nor to the spoils of monasteries, nor to a fortune made in trade, but to successful farming'.<sup>3</sup> The backbone of this farming had been grass, livestock, and wool, but a change was to come during the second quarter of the seventeenth century associated particularly with a decline in wool prices relative to those of other agricultural products.<sup>4</sup> The cloth trade was now undergoing a period of stagnation and wool was less in demand than formerly. Faced with the threat of a heavy decline in their revenues derived from wool, the prices obtained for mutton alone did not appear sufficiently rewarding for the Spencers to maintain their great sheep flocks for much longer, and other uses for their land had to be considered. Dr. Finch has shown that the numbers of sheep

<sup>1</sup> M. E. Finch, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> J. H. Round, *Studies in Peerage and Family History* (1901), p. 281.

<sup>4</sup> See J. E. Thorold Rogers, *A History of Agriculture and Prices in England* (1882), v. 207; E. Kerridge, 'The Movement of Rent, 1540-1640', *Economic History Review*, vi, no. 1 (1953), 16-34.