Account of Purley on Thames

Farming from Civil War to WW1

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Introduction

Farming in the period from the Civil War to the start of the second world war was dominated by two issues; first, the development of farming methods and the movement from a subsistence economy towards an agricultural industry and second the transformation of land ownership and the movement of people from the land to the towns.

The first of these was essentially a technical issue. It began with the keeping of records of usage and yields, moved through larger scale cultivation and specialisation enabled by improved transport and communications and was concluded by the academic study of agricultural technique and the application of theory to practice. Reading was in fact in the forefront of the academic movement through its agricultural institutes which eventually came together under the University of Reading.

In mediaeval times it was almost impossible to transfer the ownership of land. Occupation was more important than ownership and this brought with it rights and obligations. By the time of the Civil War lawyers were devising ways of effecting land transfers and this was helped by the need to resolve disputes caused by confiscation of land by Parliament and the restitution of some of it by the Crown after the Restoration.

The period also saw the Industrial Revolution and the impact this made as people flooded from the countryside to the towns. The town had for long been a refuge and a means of escape from feudal servitude but it often brought other disadvantages. The Industrial Revolution however brought employment which had often been denied in the past by the monopoly of the town Guilds. Their power was forever broken and the mass desertion of the countryside could now begin.

The Development of Technique

We can divide farming into four quite distinct categories.

> First there is arable farming where the sequence of ploughing, sowing, harvesting and fertilisation was repeated with different crops year upon year.
>
> Then there is animal husbandry in which animals are bred, females used to yield milk or eggs, shorn to provide wool, used to provide fertiliser and then slaughtered to produce food and other by-products.
>
> Next there is the farming of natural assets with minimal management and intervention, coppicing, use of meadowlands, fruit growing and forestry.
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> Finally there is a combination of the latter two methods which we may characterise by hunting, gathering and fishing.

In earlier times the application of these methods were based upon long established custom and practice, which varied from place to place but which in any one place rarely changed. It was known what crops would grow where, it was known what animals would thrive in a given area and each area developed its own native breeds. Natural assets depended in the main upon geography, if there was a river there were meadows and fishing, if there were woods there was forestry and coppicing.

Man had learned simple conservation techniques and agriculture had reached a balance with nature.

The 18th century was marked by the introduction of farm mechanisation and the scientific study of farming methods. The process of technique improvement was accelerated by the enclosure movement and the establishment in 1793 of the Board of Agriculture whose task it was to gather information and to publish reports.

By the end of the period there had been significant improvement in techniques, Farming had moved from a subsistence activity which barely fed its local population to a state where it was regarded as a profitable business, based on sound scientific principles, mechanised and employing less than 5% of the total population. In many areas it was even able to export food.

Improvements in Arable Farming

By the end of the 17th century it had become apparent that the old ways could not go on forever. People began by swapping strips to provide a more consolidated holding and it became the custom to set an area of the common field with grass. Thus after ploughing a line would be drawn across the strips and each strip holder would sow the agreed crop in one part of his long furrows and grass in the area designated.

This had the effect of providing better grazing for animals in the period from harvest to the turn of the year when they would brought in so that the land could recover before the spring ploughing. Gradually this came to replace the fallow period in the rotational cycle.

The rotational cycles became more complex as crops such as peas and beans and vetches were introduced.

Arable farming was transformed by the process of enclosure. Instead of the great fields of several hundred acres, much smaller fields were created by planting hedges, building walls or fences or by digging a ditch. In Purley, on the whole, hedging was used for this purpose with quick-growing hawthorn as the preferred choice.

There are indications however that initially ditches were dug to separate holdings and then a landholder would plant a hedge on his side of the ditch. Eventually the ditch would be abandoned and become filled in but the property boundary remained a foot or so beyond the hedge.

Now a single field of perhaps five to thirty acres would be used for a single crop. It would be ploughed by one owner, sown evenly and harvested. There was no need to leave uncultivated furrows between strips although this gain was offset by the land needed for the hedge. The hedges provided shelter to the crops and made them less susceptible o wind and weather, they provided habitats for birds and animals who would both eat the crops and hunt other vermin.

Once a single person had control it was inevitable that there would be experimentation. Good ideas could be put into practice without needing to be debated and assented to by the whole community. New crops could be tried and if they proved successful would be copied by neighbours. More importantly perhaps there was incentive to put in proper drainage. Many ancient fields suffered badly from water lying in the furrows and waterlogging the seed.

The voyages of adventurers and explorers also had an impact. Many more completely new species of crops were introduced. Some like the potato caught on very quickly, others like maize were much slower to be accepted.

In the 18th century cabbages, Kohl rabi and rape were introduced. New strains of grasses were found to give better yields on the meadows, and a rye-grass/red clover mix would perform even better, to the extent of enabling a second crop to be taken.

This second crop or aftermath as it was called was the basis for a bitter dispute between the rector, William Gostwicke and Mrs Mary Blagrave in 1711. This is in fact a very early date for the use of clover and the Blagraves must have been very venturesome to have introduced it to Purley. When the

aftermath was cut Mrs Blagrave flatly refused to pay a tithe on it as she claimed she had already paid the tithe on the first crop. She was eventually forced to give way but the record in the Parish Register throws an interesting light on the practice.

Jethro Tull, the celebrated agricultural innovator, lived at Basildon only a few miles away. His major contribution was the seed drill, which enabled the seed to be planted more evenly than was possible with broadcasting and in rows which made it easier to hoe and cultivate the crop.

Steam power for mills was introduced in northern England in the 1760s and it soon found other applications on the farm.

Robert Ransome patented his tempered cast iron plough-share in 1785. This rapidly replaced the wooden ploughshare tipped with iron as it was far more durable and efficient.

Major improvements in cereal yields was obtained by selecting the seed corn before reaping. One just picked the largest and most heavily bearing heads and used these as a source of seed corn. A few enterprising corn-merchants took this up in a big way and the genetic improvements they induced were marketed as virtually new strains.

The ancient rotation system had been wheat - barley - fallow. There was not sufficient differentiation between wheat and barley, both took nitrogen out of the soil and the fertilisation by animals was essential to restore the health of the soil. But what grew in the fallow year was not sufficient, or always suitable for feeding grazing animals. Thus a four year rotation was devised. This went Wheat - root crop - barley - seeds. Initially the root crop was turnip but this was later replaced by swedes and mangolds. The seed was often a mixture of red-clover and rye grass and provided both a hay crop and abundant grazing.

Animal Husbandry

Animals were all individually owned by the villagers who might have just one or two beasts. However the herds were managed as a whole by specialists such as shepherds and cowherds. On the whole however they were concerned principally only with the beasts they actually owned and other beasts would be neglected. Pressures grew for owners to provide their own enclosed fields where they could be properly looked after.

Techniques for improving animal husbandry tending to revolve around selective breeding and methods of feeding. In the latter category a new method of feeding sheep was devised. A large field would be planted with a root crop, initially turnips, but later swedes or mangolds. When the crop was ready a fence would be erected around a portion of the field and sheep enclosed there to feed on the crop and fertilise the ground. After a period the fences would be moved to enclose a further area so that eventually the whole field was covered. This both saved the labour of lifting the crop and ensured a much more even distribution of manure.

The newly introduced rape crop would be mixed with linseed oil and pressed into a nourishing cake used for feeding cattle. Mr Sherwood of Purley was reported by Mavor in 1809 as using 'considerable quantities of oil cake in fattening cattle' (ref 209)

Sheep had traditionally been kept only for their wool. Their meat had been eaten when they were no longer useful for this purpose or to keep the flocks down when feed became scarce. Around 1761 in Leicestershire, Robert Bakewell began a selective breeding programme to improve the quality and edibility of the meat and to bring the optimum age for slaughter down from three to four years to two. The result was the virtual disappearance of many of the traditional breeds. The new breeds he introduced were not so well adapted to their surroundings as had been the traditional breeds, thus feeding them became more of a problem and the need for turnips and clover increased.

The preponderant breeds in Purley in 1809 were Wiltshire and South Downs. Mr Sherwood did not breed but bought as store to be fattened off. (ref 209)

Horses had been used mainly as riding and pack animals, but again selective breeding provided new strains which were much bigger and stronger and which could be used for ploughing and hauling instead of the traditional oxen which disappeared from the scene in a matter of fifty years or so. Later of course the horse was replaced by the internal combustion engine and is now back to almost its original role.

Forestry and Gathering

The demands of the Royal Navy all but denuded England of its ancient broad leafed forests. In a report of 1608 there were 123,927 oaks fit for the navy and by 1783 this figure was reduced to 12,447. We might assume that the ancient oak on Long Lane was originally part of such a forest which separated Purley from Reading, Tilehurst and Theale.

In managing their estates the gentry in the 18th and 19th centuries were careful to leave small stands of trees to provide shelter for game birds and we may recognise several such in Purley.

The Price of Corn

The traditional cereal crops were wheat, oats, barley and rye. While all could be used interchangeably for most purposes wheat tended to be used for bread making, oats for cooking and porridge, barley for malt making and rye for feeding animals. Yields were very low, around 10 bushels per acre at first. However all yields were on the increase as new strains were introduced and more careful management was practised.

Grain is a fairly bulky crop and it was neither easy nor profitable to carry it over long distances. Grain barges could ply the Thames and malting barley particularly could be transported from the arable lands in the upper Thames Valley to the beweries of London. The coming of the canals greatly enhanced the possibilities for bulk transport of grain and the opening of the prairies of the Americas as grain growing areas produced huge surpluses which could be exported to the old world.

The net result was a considerable drop in the price of grain, except in the odd years of poor harvests, which made it un-economic to grow in small areas. The natural consequence was that in the rural areas many cereals almost disappeared from production, millers went out of business and the price of bread soared. The hardship this produced added further to the flight from the land to the town where supplies were ample.

From being first self-sufficient England moved to being a grain exporter, but by 1765 this trend had reversed and England had ceased to export. England became a net importer and landowners began to complain that they were not reaping the profits they believed they were entitled to.

In a vain attempt to re-dress the balance and restore the old order the infamous Corn Laws were passed starting in 1773. This prohibited the import of corn until the domestic price had reached a certain price. In 1764 the average price was reported as being 33/3 per quarter. Burke's Corn Law of 1773 set the threshold price at 48s after which imported corn bore a duty of 6d per quarter. In 1791 the protection level was raised to 54/- and in 1804 to 66/-. In later schemes the duty was levied on a sliding scale so that it varied with the average domestic price.

The result was that the large landowners made significant profits from selling smaller quantities of grain. They reduced wages to make the profits even larger and created mass poverty in rural areas.

As a consequence of a series of bad harvests between 1793 and 1801 the price soared as importing became impractical due to the Napoleonic Wars and the American War of Independence. Corn became enmeshed in a wider debate between protectionism and free trade. In the towns Anti-Corn Law Associations were formed to protest the artificially high cost of bread.

In 1815 the protected price reached 80/- but in 1820 it was reduced to 64s and in November 1822 to 38/10. After an exceptionally bad harvest in 1845 the duty was reduced to a standard 1/- per quarter

and in 1846 and the protected price effectively removed. This was the end of a bitter battle which had made some people very rich and driven very many people to the brink of starvation and ruin.

The real threat to prices however came after repeal. In the 1850s and 1860s the railways and the new steam powered ships realised the potential of the Americas to provide grain for England.

Reported average prices were:-

1719	32/-
1723	32/9
1728	49/11
1731	30/-
1732	24/4
1733	25/11
1740	46/5
1743-4	22/9
1745	25/2
1755	31/-
1757	55/-
1764	33/3
1776	
1794	60/9
1795	91/8
1796	90/4
1797	69/9
1800	142/10
1850-70	52/- ave

The prices at Reading market can be noted for 1776-1781 and show considerable variations. (prices are minimum)

mo	wheat (load)	barley (qtr)	oats (qtr)	rye (qtr)
1776				
Jan	170/-	15/-	16/-	
Feb	180/-	16/-	16/-	
Mar	180/-	18/-	17/-	
Apl	180/-	18/-	18/-	
May	180/-	18/-	17/-	
June	180/-	18/-	17/-	
July	180/-	20/-	18/-	
Aug	190/-	21/-	18/-	
Sep	210/-	21/-	18/-	
Oct	200/-	22/-	20/-	
Nov	210/-	20/-	16/-	
Dec	210/-	20/-	18/-	
1777				
Jan	210/-	20/-	16/-	

Feb	210/-	18/-	16/-	
Mar	220/-	18/-	16/-	
Apl	220/-	18/-	18/-	
May	230/-	21/-	18/-	
June	230/-	20/-	21/-	
July	240/-	20/-	18/-	
Aug	240/-	20/-	20/-	
Sep	280/-	24/-	18/-	
Oct	260/-	22/-	18/-	
Nov	260/-	23/-	18/-	
Dec	260/-	20/-	12/-	23/-
1778				
Jan	250/-	23/-	17/-	
Jul	40/-(qtr)	26/-	19/-	
1779				
Jan	180/-	20/-	17/-	
Jul	180/-	21/-	14/-	
1780				
Jan	220/-	18/-	12/-	
Jul	140/-	18/-	13/-	
1781				
Jan	200/-	17/-	13/-	
Jul	240/-	17/-	18/6	

The Sherwoods

Many families farmed the lands in and around Purley but none matched the ascendancy of the Sherwoods. They started as tenant farmers when ... Sherwood took over ....Farm around vvv. Gradually however they leased other land and by the mid 1800s were farming almost the whole of Purley.

They were noted in Mavor's 'Survey of the Agriculture of Berkshire' in 1809 as having both cattle and sheep.

Members of the family occupied almost every official position in Purley and in 1831 Edward Sherwood was Churchwarden, Constable, Surveyor and Overseer all at the same time.

The Enclosures

The switch from open field to enclosed farming has been going on since early Saxon times. Field names from the 13th century such as Heggescroft indicate that some land at least in Purley had been enclosed by then.

The Black Death reduced the population severely in the 14th century and this removed many of the objections to enclosure. Enclosure was much more suitable for sheep farming and with the boom in wool that took place in the 14th and 15th centuries in the area we may assume that many fields were enclosed on this account. Particularly in Purley one notes the abundance of enclosed fields to the

south of the parish with names such as Shepherds Pightle.

The arguement about enclosure of arable land was one of yield and efficiency. It was rightly observed that if the complete field was managed as a whole, sown evenly and looked after by one individual, the yield would increase and it would be much easier to manage than a series of random strips separated by considerable distances. The contra-argument was of course that to enclose meant that the good and bad land were unevenly distributed, that the rich, with the good land, would get richer and the poor with no land would get even poorer.

To some extent it was the people in the middle who decided the matter. Their argument was that they could make a better living from farming the poor land than from the old system which was very inefficient.

In the 15th and 16th century enclosure was effected by enrolling a Chancery Decree but by the 17th century this process was replaced by a private bill in Parliament. Only 8 such Acts were made in the

17th century and only 2 in the reign of Queen Anne. Between 1714 and 1720 5 Acts were passed. Then the numbers soared. From 1721-40 67 were passed; from 1741-60, 205; from 1761-80, 4039 and from 1781 to 1800 900.

By the mid-18th century most of Purley was already enclosed and only the two main fields, the Hither and East fields and the Common Meadow were farmed in the old ways. The General Enclosure Act of 1803 had made it easier for the Lords of the Manor to take over and enclose land, driving off the peasants and turning them into agricultural labourers in the process.

By the 1760s the yeoman farmer with his own small holding, rights of common and a real say in what happened, had virtually disappeared as a class to be replaced by tenant farmers, agricultural labourers and employed craftsmen. The remaining population were forced, or chose to flee to the towns.

In Purley the process was spread over a long period but finally in 1855 a petition was submitted for the two Great Fields and the Common Meadow of Purley to be enclosed and a plan for enclosure was drawn up by George Easton. The plan was on view at the house of Savory Griffin (Westbury Farm)

The effect was to consolidate the land into three major holdings, roughly corresponding to the three ancient manors and a few minor holdings. The major holdings were:-

The Storers of Purley Park. - Anthony Morris Storer held 93a, 1r, 27p and a further 4 acres which had been retained by the executors of Anthony Gilbert Storer.

The Powys family of Hardwick - Henry Philip Powys had 78-0-9 in his own occupation and he leased 5-2-7 to Edward Sherwood and 1-2-33 to Thomas Newbury

The Wilders of Purley Hall. - Frederick Wilder held 2-2-29 in Sulham Parish, 59-2-39 in Whitchurch Parish and 33-1-21 in Purley Parish. However it should be noted that these lands were all in Purley's Great fields and meadows and were all transferred to Purley in 1894.

The remaining 21 acres were divided among two landholders, The Rector Richard Palmer who had 17 acres 3 roods and 15 perches of Glebe and John Engelberts Liebenrood with just over 3 acres (3-1-18), a further xxx acres was described as wastelands and roads, ie Westbury and Purvey's Lanes

Tithes

Originally Tithes were derived from an obligation on all Christians to give a tenth of the fruits of their labour to the good of all. It was the church which collected and distributed these contributions which were almost always in kind. Tithing was originally a voluntary activity but under king .... it was made compulsory in 8vv. Archbishop l.... ordered that the tithes should be split into three with a third going to maintain the local church, a third to support the poor and a third to provide hospitality for travellers and pilgrims. (see section JA)

By the 16th century however the tithes had been consolidated into the greater and lesser tithes and controlled by patrons and rectors of the church. The Reformation and Elizabethan reforms effectively made tithes part of the income of the church and many clerical offices were funded from them and used to provide a nice steady income for those lucky enough to be appointed. Very little was expected in return and the system became known as the sinecure, or 'without responsibility'.

Under Queen Anne however things changed again and in 1707 all the tithes owned by the crown, which included those of Purley, were consolidated into a single fund, known as Queen Anne's Bounty, which was used to provide a subsidy to the clergy, both to provide an income and to help pay for housing.

William Gostwickes dispute

Tithes on land acquired by the railway.

Problems had arisen in determining precisely who should pay the tithes and upon what. The Tithing Act of 18... forced the issue and Commissioners were sent to all parishes to draw maps, identify parcels of land and assign responsibilities. This resulted in Purley in the Tithe Award of 1840.

We come across brief glimpses of tithes in correspondence.

By the turn of the century it had been the custom to agree a commuted sum to replace an annual payment. and by 1927 almost all the tithes had been so redeemed. However the practise lingered on and we hear of the County Council resolving to redeem tithes on small strips of land boight to widen the Oxford Road as late as 19..

Tithes were finally abolished in 19..

The Agricultural Labourer

As the enclosure movement gathered momentum rights to graze on common land and gathering fuel were lost to many villagers and this imposed great hardship. This was exacerbated by a significant change in status as they became almost totally dependent upon the landowners for employment and shelter. This change from smallholder to employed labourer brought many families to the point of starvation.

Without the rights of grazing it was no longer feasible for a family to own a few cows to provide milk and butter. Without the fuel for fires it was difficult to cook and the diet reduced to little more than bread and cheese supplemented by the odd item of fruit. Many families were able to cook meat no more than once a week and it was not possible to keep houses warm.

Parish Relief was supposed to provide the labourer and his family with extra income to compensate for the losses in rights occasioned by the enclosures, however the system begun at Speenhamland near Newbury tied this relief to the price of bread. Nevertheless the lot of the English agricultural labourer tended to be be much better than that for his equivalent in continental Europe.

Agricultural wages have been assessed from 1790 (taken as index of 100). Over the period of the Napoleonic wars this rose steadily to 170 but when men were released from army service this dropped to 160 by 1816 and with a slight rise in 1820-24, continued a steady drift downwards to 138 by 1845.

Agricultural Education

Until the 20th century agricultural technique was learned on the job. Fathers passed their skills on to sons, mothers to daughters. In 19.. Berkshire County Council began to levy a special rate for Agricultural Education. Initially this was used to pay for classes held in village halls up and down the County. There were classes in bee-keeping, horticulture, animal husbandry etc.

Bibliography

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1	Purley Parish News, see ppn 12/85 page 18 re John Wilder d 1673
8	Berkshire Mercury
	Purley Parish registers (account of rails, dispute over clover)
209	Mavor's Survey 1809
	Enclosure award
	Tithe award
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	The shaping of the Countryside (Ralph Whitlock 1979)