

FARMING IN OXENHALL

1775 - 1912

Much is said in farming circles of the radical changes which are taking place in the industry these days. During the last two centuries there has been a gradual evolution of the farming scene as we know it which must have seemed as revolutionary to the farmers of those days as modern trends do to the farmers of today.

The parish of Oxenhall is in north-west Gloucestershire. It is a typical parish of those in the area, situated just to the north of Newent about 10 miles from Gloucester. Its homesteads are scattered all over the parish, there being no nucleated settlement, even the church standing isolated. In this part of Gloucestershire the enclosure of the open fields took place quite early, but a few strips remained in 1775 and tracts of woodland still covered about a quarter of the area of the parish, which the landowner largely kept for his own use. It is a parish of 1,887 acres which had a small coalfield, and a 17th century iron works at 'The Furnace'. Agriculture was, and still is, the most important occupation in the parish.

The owners of the estate in the late eighteenth century were the Foleys of Stoke Edith in Herefordshire. In 1775 they ordered a survey of their estates to be taken. The land in Oxenhall was a relatively small part of their extensive holdings but they owned all the land in the parish except for two farms. The first, Oxenhall Court, belonged to an absentee landlord, Maynard Colchester of Westbury on Severn, and the second, Marshall's Farm, belonged to Mr. George Clarke. Together with this Survey the tithe apportionment map of 1842 and sale particulars of 1912 (when the whole estate, then in possession of the Foleys' descendants, the Onslows, was sold) were examined.

These three documents, covering almost a century and a half provided evidence which could be easily plotted and subsequently compared, particularly the three major aspects of these three various surveys, land utilisation, the size of fields and the extent of the farms.

The survey of 1755 however was inadequate in the first respect. There was no evidence of land usage save for the sometimes useful field names. But names such as Bare Gains, The Harps, Bannut Tree Field, Little Soeshill, The Dean, Great Hectorn, Moat Field, Sawpit Field and Mine Pit, whilst being very interesting, do not provide much scope for the deduction of their probable usage. From the scanty evidence available there appeared a picture of a parish with a large number of orchards and the rest divided almost

equally between arable fields and pasture.

The orchards were not situated in any particular area although the majority of them were in the north east. The larger ones were situated away from the farmhouses but every farmer had at least one area laid to orchard to supply himself with cider. Wherever these orchards were in the parish they were invariably on south-east facing slopes, the ideal position according to William Marshall in his Rural Economy of Gloucestershire.

The orchards were of value both as fruit growing areas and as pasture, although, no doubt the latter was detrimental to the former. This duality could explain the large number of orchards and the decreased number of pasture fields in 1842. Moreover there is no doubt that orchards were a profitable venture. For if there was any surplus to the requirements of the household the fruit, or the finished product found a ready market. The smallholders and labourers of this area found this fruit to be a very profitable sideline without there being too much work involved. But there was a great seasonal variation in the price that the cider would fetch. In 1784, for example, a 110 gallon hogshead of cider fetched fourteen shillings. Two years later in a very bad season the same hogshead would fetch five guineas.

This seasonal fluctuation in price may in part account for the prominence of orchards in 1842 when there were 38 orchards which covered a much greater acreage than the 27 orchards that existed in 1775, or in 1912 when there were 19. By the twentieth century the apple had lost its position of economic prominence in this area because these orchards are to be found only on small parcels of land adjacent to the labourers' cottages. From the large number of 'Pear Tree Meadows' in the parish it would suggest that perry was also produced quite widely at one time.

Apart from these orchards and the extensive woods which were largely kept in hand by the owner or his largest tenants there are a large number of arable fields which diminish in number as time passes particularly in the late nineteenth century. This it would appear is in line with national trends. Another trend which is also to be found on a national level is the definite movement in increasing the size of the fields. On average six 1775 fields made one 1912 field and yet there were more fields in 1842 on the Foley estate (349) than either in 1775 when there were 321 or 210 in the whole parish in 1912. Although these fields grew in size the number of fields remained fairly constant for each of the surviving farms. Thus the farmer could still grow the same combination of crops and provide the same number of meadows for his animals. New fields extended to the natural boundaries, or encroached a little further into the common and woodland. In

the northern area in particular the woodland was encroached upon by the smallholders of Shaw Common. But all these expansions and extensions of land came about in a very rational manner and the parcels of land that existed in 1912 must have been as economically sized as they could be for that period.

By 1912 even the encroachments on Shaw Common had been amalgamated into the larger farms. This process of enlargement would seem to be an almost constant feature of the countryside as we can still see it happening today. This trend towards larger units was fostered by the landowners. This beneficial and enlightened policy is also to be seen in the farmhouses on the estate. Many of them, such as Hilter Farm, Pella, Greenways and Winters Farm were rebuilt in the early nineteenth century. This had its obvious advantages for both owners and tenants who also both benefit from the trend to expand the farms. The farms in this parish are invariably found in the centre of their land. This has obvious advantages for the farmer but is surprisingly little seen. It is one of the most marked changes to be seen in Oxenhall over this century and a half. The fields and land of the various farms have changed hands so that instead of the land being widely distributed over the parish, blocks of land appear circling the homesteads. This is a rational and extremely beneficial trend for all concerned.

The coming of the canal and railway obviously made a few changes to the agricultural scene, but as the trains did not stop here the effect is restricted to the definite boundary that it provides. The farmers on either side of the line sensibly exchanged their lands to make their farms into blocks.

The farms of Oxenhall were large even by today's standards. Of the twenty three farms in 1775, three of them were over one hundred acres, Winter's Farm, Hilter's Farm and Pella. In 1842 the number of farms had been reduced to sixteen and most of them had reached one hundred acres, and the holdings of the largest land holder, William Cummings, amounted to two hundred and fifteen acres. In 1912 the number of farms was twelve all about the same size. It is rather interesting that George Goulding was a tenant or co-tenant of three of these farms and Robert Savidge of two. So that the number of farms under separate management was nine.

This gradual combination of farms is the most marked feature of this area in the century and a half between 1775 and 1912. Not only do farms amalgamate to form larger units but farms are exchanged or altered to bring them into the confines of a more definite area. This trend is quite pronounced and reflects the economic and social trends of the country at large.

J. Pearson