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Recent Changes in Northamptonshire Husbandry

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W. A. Stewart (1930) *Recent Changes in Northamptonshire Husbandry* ; Husbandry In England, pp 38 - 42 - DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23637/ERADOC-1-201>

(10) Market gardening as distinct from agriculture is also developing, and some farmers are devoting more attention to market-garden crops.

With regard to rotations the position to-day is exceedingly complicated. The four-course rotation is still practised on the heavy land, and the five-course on the lighter soils; but there are endless variations, and some farmers do not work to any particular rotation, cropping their land in such a way as to secure the best possible cash return. Three white crops may be grown in succession. Potatoes may come into the course at close intervals, and, as already mentioned, there is a very marked increase in the area under grass.

As for live stock, changes in public demand have led to greater attention being paid to early maturity in cattle, sheep and pigs. Poultry-keeping on the farm is developing to a marked extent.

Summary

To sum up, recent developments in cropping in Hertfordshire have been mainly along two lines: (1) the transition from arable to grass, and (2) the diversification of the root crops. How far these changes are affecting the economic position of the industry it is difficult to judge. In some cases improvement may have been effected, in others nothing has been achieved. The chief trouble is undoubtedly the cost of labour and low prices, and farmers are more and more tending to fight shy of those crops which have a high labour requirement.

There is an increased interest in and demand for labour-saving devices, and a growing inclination to adopt cheaper, if less correct, methods.

While a few farmers may be doing well, the great majority are having a hard fight. Hertfordshire agriculture is in a parlous state. Farmers generally are alive to the need for something being done. So far, escape has eluded them. They keep on hoping for conditions to improve, but hope, while a valuable asset, is scarcely a marketable commodity.

RECENT CHANGES IN NORTHAMPTONSHIRE HUSBANDRY

By W. A. STEWART, M.A.

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ON examining the figures of the acreages of agricultural land and of the principal farm crops in 1914 (the last year uninfluenced by the war), in 1919 (the year after the cessation of hostilities), and in the two recent years, 1926 and 1927, the most striking feature is that the acreage of arable land is 15,600 acres less in 1927 than

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in 1914. On the other hand, the area of permanent grass has increased to the extent of only 6500 acres. Taking the figures for the "total area under crops and grass" there were 517,316 acres in 1914 and 508,229 acres in 1919. There is, therefore, a "loss" or "disappearance" of some 9000 acres from the agricultural land of the county. These 9000 acres will be accounted for in various ways—land absorbed into industrial or urban areas, land used for building, gardens, pleasure- and recreation-grounds, road-making, etc. There are also some 2300 acres now classed as "rough grazings," and not now included in the crop and grass area. This reduces the figure for "lost agricultural land" to about 6700 acres. In 1919 the total arable area was (approx.) 188,000 acres, or nearly 30,000 acres more than in 1914, and 45,000 acres more than in 1927.

Although the total arable area is 15,600 acres less in 1927 than in 1914, the wheat area is reduced only to the extent of some 2500 acres. Barley has gone down to the extent of 13,700 acres, or over 40 per cent. Oats have remained fairly constant. The bean average is less by 4200 acres—a 30 per cent. reduction. Potatoes have increased by some 750 acres, and sugar-beet has gone up from 0 to over 2000 acres.

The most notable figures, however, are those for temporary leys and for roots for feeding. Temporary leys are shown to have increased by 7500 acres. Possibly this figure may be inflated, as the area of temporary grass and clover in 1914 was unusually low, and it is not unlikely that in 1927 some land which will eventually become permanent pasture was returned as temporary. Roots for feeding have decreased by some 6600 acres.

These figures confirm, generally, observations made during the last few years. Farmers appear to favour the wheat crop in preference to barley, partly because the market has been less uncertain than for barley, and partly because the work in connection with wheat-growing has fitted in better with the general organization of the farm labour. Spring oats are now found to be very uncertain on account of their being subject to frit-fly attacks; and it is generally recognized, in most districts, that unless spring oats are drilled early in February it is unsafe to attempt to grow them.

The figure quoted for the increase in the acreage of temporary leys illustrates the change that is taking place with regard to rotations. It has become common to have two-year leys in preference to one-year seeds or clover. In certain cases, also, land is being laid down for four, five or six years, with the intention of breaking it up again after fertility has been accumulated by the agency of wild white clover. Generally, two-year leys are not proving altogether satisfactory, as they fail to improve the fertility of land to the same marked extent as temporary leys of three years'

duration laid down with wild white clover in the mixture, like those employed in the North. So far, two years have not been found sufficiently long to allow wild white clover to get properly established.

Clover sickness has been fairly common in the past, and partly as a precaution against this disease, but more with a view to the general improvement of the fertility and healthiness of the arable land, more attention is being paid to liming. It is becoming customary to give a dressing, generally equivalent to about 10 cwt. ground lime per acre—once in the rotation—usually applied in the autumn or early winter to the young seeds or clover ley.

The area of roots for feeding has gone down from some 19,600 to some 13,000 acres, and this reduction of 6600 acres in the root area, together with the increase in grass-land, has brought about noticeable changes in the systems of live-stock husbandry, as regards both cattle and sheep. Although the figures for live stock do not show that there has been any considerable increase in the number of fattening cattle, farmers have now reduced facilities for wintering fattening stock, with the result that increasingly large numbers are being offered in the autumn months, and prices for fat cattle are at a low level at this time of year. From February onwards there are insufficient numbers of fat cattle produced locally to supply the local requirements. It has been customary to "import" fat stock from the Norfolk area in spring, but apparently the supplies available from that source are now smaller, and in the spring months of 1928 prices rose sharply. A comparatively high level of prices prevailed until grass-fed cattle came on the market in relatively large numbers.

It would seem likely that these seasonal fluctuations are likely to continue, with heavy supplies of fat cattle and low prices in the autumn, and scarcer supplies and a sharper demand in the latter part of the winter and in spring. An important and serious problem has therefore arisen as to the wintering of cattle, now that there is more grass and fewer root or forage crops for stock-feeding. It is not an easy problem to solve, but possibly some partial solution may be found in the application of the new system of grass-land management. An extension of the grass-growing season in autumn should lengthen the period during which fattening stock could be kept at grass without loss of weight. On the Moulton Experimental Farm young cattle of about two years old have increased in weight up to the end of October, maintained their weight in November, but required help in the form of concentrated feeding-stuffs and hay to maintain condition from 1st December onwards. Another way of tackling the problem would be to make more hay, but a practical difficulty arises in this connection, as normally grass-land farms have only sufficient labour and equipment to deal with a limited hay area.

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Any considerable extension in hay-making would therefore involve the necessity for employing more labour and possibly also for more expenditure on hay-making implements and machines.

There has been a marked increase in the number of dairy cows kept and in milk-selling since 1914.

With regard to sheep, the reduced root area and the increased acreage of grass-land have brought about a change in the class of ewes kept. Although it was not customary in the past to fold ewes on arable land prior to lambing, it was a comparatively common practice to feed a limited quantity of roots to ewes on grass, and it was fairly general to fold ewes and lambs on roots after lambing. This is no longer possible to the same extent, and sheep-breeders have given up the Down or Down cross ewes and replaced them with grass-land ewes, of which the principal is the Scotch Half-bred or Border Leicester—Cheviot Cross (erroneously called locally the Border-Leicester). Others which have given satisfaction are the Kerry Hill, Clun, Cheviot, Greyface and Masham ewes.

Last spring, fat sheep, off roots, made good prices, and one would appear to be on reasonably safe ground in looking forward to a keen demand for fat sheep again this spring, both because "teg" sheep seem to be scarce, largely on account of the fact that big numbers of lambs are now killed fat, and because of the reduced acreage of roots available for winter fattening. A recent investigation has shown that some 32 per cent. of the lambs bred in the Market Harborough district are sold as fat lambs.

It is true that sugar-beet tops are providing a new and useful winter food, and although yields comparable to those of swedes and kale have been secured, so far, the tops on many farms have not been very fully utilized.

Pigs have fluctuated in numbers in Northamptonshire as elsewhere during the period under review, but the number of pigs kept does not appear to have affected the general systems of husbandry to any appreciable extent. It has been the object on the Moulton Farm to demonstrate a system of pig-keeping whereby the breeding pigs and young stock are maintained in such a way as to fit in with the ordinary farm policy. By using shelters on runners, which can be moved quite easily by yoking a horse to a shelter, and by devising suitable fences, it has been possible to enclose the pigs and to keep them on grass or arable land at different seasons, as found convenient. On arable land they are used to "glean" the potato ground and to consume sugar-beet tops or green crops as required—with considerable economy in concentrated feeding-stuffs and to the benefit of the land by means of well-distributed pig manure.

Although the returns do not show a marked increase in the acreages of small fruit and orchards, a change has taken place in the attitude towards fruit, and by attention to modern methods of

fruit-growing the productiveness of the fruit area has been considerably increased.

Poultry-keeping has come to be regarded by farmers as an important adjunct to the farm, and a large number of farmers are now paying special attention to poultry and are keeping fowls on a commercial scale. An important change has been from the ordinary nondescript barn-door fowl to definite breeds. Cockerels from trap-nested stock are much more commonly used than formerly, and attention is paid to proper methods of feeding and management. In connection with the improvement of laying stock, the County Agricultural Education Authority has helped materially by running a Cockerel Distribution Scheme whereby selected cockerels from stock with high trapnest records are distributed to farmers at a reasonable price. In recent years there has been an increased demand for cockerels under this scheme.

On the lighter-land farms—those with about one-third arable and two-thirds grass—where milk-selling is practised, where sheep are kept, and where attention is paid to side-lines like poultry and fruit, the prospects are relatively brighter. On heavy-land arable farms, however, the outlook is depressing. One farmer who farms on an extensive scale—who employs steam tackle, has large fields suitable for large-scale farming, and generally farms just about as well as is possible under present-day conditions—has lost money although his yields of wheat have been above the average. On another heavy-land farm just over the Northamptonshire border 1000 acres of arable land have been left derelict since last year. A third heavy-land farm (300 acres arable, 100 acres grass) with good buildings, and once regarded as a productive and desirable holding, cannot be let, although 8s. per acre would be accepted from a suitable tenant. It is indeed hard to see how farmers with arable farms on the poorer classes of heavy land can continue to carry on under existing conditions.

AGRICULTURAL CONDITIONS IN NOTTINGHAMSHIRE AS AF- FECTED BY RECENT CHANGES

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IN the past, farming systems have to a large extent been ruled by soil and climatic conditions. In Notts nearly one-fifth of the total area is uncultivated, due largely to the extensive "waste" land of Sherwood Forest on the Bunter formation. The main agricultural areas are formed by Magnesium Limestone, Bunter and Keuper geo-