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Recent Changes in the System of Husbandry in South Lincolnshire

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On the Southdowns the changes are in quite another direction: here the primary condition is to reduce expenses, particularly labour, consequently the wheat area is cut down to a minimum; very few root crops which want hoeing are sown, their place being partly taken by rape and turnips. Grass is rapidly increasing in acreage; much of it is called temporary, but probably only time will be needed to convert it into permanent pasture. This movement would be much accelerated if it were not for the expense and difficulty of fencing and providing a water-supply on the chalk. The real Southdown Hill flock is becoming a thing of the past, and in many cases nothing is taking its place; no one who has the capital to found one will take a large hill farm.

To sum up shortly, I would say that the influences at work to-day in the district of which I am speaking are:

Firstly, the break up of the landed estate system, which leaves the new owner-occupier free to farm his land as he likes throughout the whole term of his occupation.

Secondly, the effort to get a more rapid turnover of the capital in the farm.

Thirdly, the desire to supply the demand for what may be termed the less essential foods.

Lastly, and all the time, the dire necessity of reducing expenses.

RECENT CHANGES IN THE SYSTEM OF HUSBANDRY IN SOUTH LINCOLNSHIRE

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PERHAPS in no part of the country has so great a change in the system of farming taken place as in South Lincolnshire. This change is comparatively recent—within the lifetime of the present-day farmers. Forty years ago the district was chiefly pasture and wheat; to-day it is all arable. In the eighties the district was, if anything, in a worse plight than other parts of the country, but the change which has taken place in the system of husbandry has made it one of the most prosperous areas in the country. Farming in South Lincolnshire has, since the beginning of the present century, been a profitable undertaking, and this prosperity has been due to the fact that the farmer has been willing to change, and did change, his system of farming.

The remarkable feature is that this change, when it began, was in direct opposition to that which was taking place in other parts

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of the country. Arable farming was in a serious plight, and land generally was tumbling down to grass. No better grass could be found anywhere than in South Lincolnshire. Long famed for its wonderful pastures, described by Arthur Young as the "glory of Lincolnshire"—pastures which would carry a bullock and a half per acre, as well as four sheep in summer and two in winter—it might reasonably have been expected that the proper solution to the difficulties of that period would have been the preservation and further development of these pastures. But the reverse has happened. In direct opposition to the increase in the acreage of permanent pasture in other counties in England, there has been a gradual increase of arable land in South Lincolnshire. Gone are all the wonderful pastures, the bullocks and sheep; gone is the old six-course rotation which held sway on the arable land of the larger farms, and instead there has developed one of the most intensive systems of farming, with the potato crop as its centre, ever practised in this country. The acreage of potatoes alone has increased in Lincolnshire from 40,352 acres in 1883 to 112,778 acres last year, and practically all that increase has taken place in the alluvial and fen districts surrounding the Wash.

This remarkable change from grass to arable at a time when the reverse was taking place in all other parts of the country is well worth consideration. This change in the system has not been achieved by the migration of new blood, such as has taken place in some other districts, but has been entirely brought about by the farmers born and bred in the district. A great deal of it is due to one or two pioneers such as William Dennis, who realized that the soil of the district was more profitable for the growing of potatoes than for the feeding of bullocks. In went the plough, and as the pasture disappeared the farmers' bank balance increased.

Definite figures to show what has taken place are difficult to get hold of. Earlier figures generally relate to Lincolnshire as a whole, and give no idea of the changes which have taken place in South Lincolnshire. That the greater portion of the area was pasture is quite definite. There was a large bullock and sheep population. The arable land was devoted chiefly to the growing of wheat, the rotation being a six-course one—fallow, oats, wheat, seeds, wheat, barley. At the present time the bullock and sheep population has sunk to very low figures, and the six-course rotation has become, at least in the maincrop potato areas, a three-course one, in which the potato predominates.

I am aware that there has been an economic incentive behind the farmer in bringing about this change in his system of cropping, but in addition there is the very important personal aspect. The South Lincolnshire farmer has always been somewhat of an adventurer. His training has been such as to make him easily adapted to

a change of system. Farming in the district has undergone many changes since the land was first reclaimed. In the early days oats were largely grown and were exported to the Continent. Later, wool became the staple industry, and large quantities were exported. Still later, bullock-feeding was a prominent feature, and in the early days of the nineteenth century oats had again become a prominent feature and were again being exported from Boston Docks in large quantities.

Potato-growing was attempted in the district as long ago as the year 1800, when one large farmer grew 200 acres for cattle food, but although he got a good crop it ruined him. In the fifties and sixties, however, potato-growing had become profitable, and its cultivation was becoming common in the Wainfleet district, mostly amongst small freeholders. At that time the district contained a large number of small freeholders. In the parish of Freiston no one farmed more than 40 acres. These men were also attempting other crops, such as celery, cabbage, cauliflower, etc. On the larger farms such crops as turnip, swede, mangold and mustard were being tried for seed purposes. On the freeholds there were of course no restrictions as to cropping, and even on the larger rented farms restrictions were very easy.

The South Lincolnshire farmer was therefore not trained to any strictly stereotyped system, and this explains to some extent why he so readily adapted himself to the new system once it had been demonstrated to him by Dennis and others. Pasture land suitable for growing potatoes soon became very valuable, and some very high prices were paid for it. Practically all the land in the district has now been bought by the farmers themselves, and it is only very rarely that a farm can be rented. The average value of the land in the county is probably £80 per acre, but double this price has occasionally been paid for land in the early districts.

The new ploughed-up land is very fertile, and can be used for the growing of early potatoes for fifteen and more years in succession. In the early districts no definite rotation is adopted. In the maincrop areas a more or less definite system is in operation, but the farmer generally is never averse to changing his cropping to suit economic conditions. For instance, the acreage of seed crops such as mangold, mustard, etc., changes upwards and downwards according to contract prices.

The system generally has produced a type of farmer keenly alive to the business side of farming and also keenly alive to new ideas and possible improvements.