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The Hertfordshire Agricultural Situation

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HERTFORDSHIRE AGRICULTURAL CONFERENCE, 11TH JANUARY 1929

BY SIR JOHN RUSSELL, D.Sc., F.R.S.

THE purpose of this Conference is to discuss the agricultural situation of Hertfordshire, in the hope of indicating the lines on which farmers and farm-workers may improve their position. All are agreed that the situation is bad, and that if left to itself it would get worse. Agricultural produce is being poured into our cities from overseas, and cold-storage and refrigeration transport are so efficient that the ordinary person cannot distinguish between meat and dairy produce six months old and that which is fresh from our own farms. Worse still, reconstituted cream is now on the market, and though in itself it may do no great harm, it is nevertheless an omen of what may come in the future.

The agriculture of Hertfordshire is so important that it is imperative for us to take all possible steps to preserve it. Although the county is so near London, and has been so much invaded for residential purposes, three-quarters of its area is still devoted to agriculture—no less than 307,000 out of its 400,000 acres. The value of the produce sold off the farms, market-gardens and glass-houses in Hertfordshire alone is estimated by Mr R. J. Thompson at £2,600,000 per annum.

At the last census 11,000 workers were employed in agriculture in the county, in addition to the farmers and their families, on the 6500 holdings of one acre or more in area. Agriculture is one of the very few industries where there is no unemployment, and its workers are perhaps the only ones in the country that cost nothing for the dole. The industry therefore deserves all possible support.

Agriculture in Hertfordshire is apparently more depressed than in some other counties. This is attributable in great part to the fact that there is more arable farming here than usual in England and Wales: 57½ per cent. of all the agricultural land is arable, and on half the area of the county the proportion rises to 70 per cent. or more; fifty years ago 70 per cent. was the proportion throughout the county.

Another direction in which Hertfordshire differs from some of its more successful neighbours is that there is still a considerable amount of general farming—the least profitable of all the kinds of farming. The meat and grain sold each bring in about £500,000 per annum—the grain is mostly wheat, barley having fallen considerably in the last forty years. Specialization, which is more hopeful for the farmer, is becoming more common: milk production is increasing, and now brings in about £500,000 per annum; more eggs and poultry, fruit and vegetables are being produced, the value of each of these two groups of products being, according to Mr Thompson, £175,000 per annum, while the glass-house

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industry (chiefly tomatoes and cucumbers) has increased considerably, and the sales amount to about £500,000 per annum.

A third difference from more prosperous counties is the lower numbers of live stock of all kinds, including poultry, per thousand acres, the proportion being lower than the average for England and Wales. The numbers of sheep, already low, continue to fall, but the numbers of cows and poultry increase.

These are the facts of the agricultural situation. We to-day are considering how the position may be improved. Two directions seem promising: production and marketing.

Production can be improved by increasing the output and by lowering the costs. The yields per acre in Hertfordshire are not particularly high: averaged for the ten years 1917-1926 they are:

	<i>Hertfordshire</i>	<i>Isle of Ely</i>	<i>England</i>
Wheat (cwt. per acre)	16·4	20·9	17·3
Barley " "	14·5	19·3	14·9
Oats " "	14·2	20·6	14·0
Potatoes ¹ (tons per acre)	5·5	6·5	6·2
Turnips " "	11·3	16·8	12·4
Mangolds " "	19·1	28·1	17·4
Hay—temporary (cwt. per acre)	28·1	34·2	28·6
Hay—permanent (" ")	18·5	22·9	21·1

In most crops Hertfordshire comes below the average for England. The cause is partly natural: the county is by no means the garden of England, and its yields are much less than for the fertile Isle of Ely. But there does seem room for improvement, and we believe this is steadily going on. Fertilizers are both cheap and abundant, and their use is becoming more widely understood; new varieties of crops are being introduced, and the Farm Institute at Oaklands is busily disseminating sound information throughout the county. Even more can be done, however, by lowering the costs of production, which are now too high. It is no use thinking of reducing wages: they are already low enough. The way is to increase the effectiveness of the worker by better organization of the farm and by the use of more machinery, and to reduce the wastes and losses of crops and animals, that are now much higher than they ought to be. Improved organization of the labour and other farm resources is a hopeful direction at which the Oaklands staff are now working. I have seen some remarkable instances where a competent organizer was able to make his farm pay, while his less successful neighbours, though with equal knowledge of agriculture, were losing money. The use of more labour-saving machinery could do a great deal, and is indeed the secret of success of the Canadian, United States and Australian wheat-growers. In nearly every other direction they are less favourably situated than our farmers: their

¹ Highest average yield, Norfolk, 6·9 tons.

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yields are lower, rates of wages are nearly twice as high, interest and other charges nearly equal our rents ; and they are liable to troubles—such as rust, drought, hail, frost—that cause us little or no concern ; further, they have to send their produce thousands of miles to market. Yet the wonderful implements made by the enterprising American and Canadian makers enable them to do an astonishing amount of work in one day. On wheat farms in Western Australia that I visited this year, one man was expected, in one day, to plough 5 or 6 acres ; to cultivate 12 or 14 acres with a disc or skim implement, or 20 acres with spring-tine cultivator ; to harrow 40 acres, drill 25 acres, or harvest 8 to 10 acres. The wages are 50s. to 60s. per week, and the yields are 15 to 20 bushels, but the cost per bushel is less than in Hertfordshire.

Losses on the farm are high. The wastage of animals is considerable, and might well be lowered. The average life of a dairy cow in the herd is far too short—only two and a quarter years, according to a recent inquiry in West Sussex, and this figure has independent support. This far exceeds the old allowance for depreciation of 1d. per gallon of milk : indeed on this basis the depreciation is nearer 2½d. per gallon. The matter is being taken up by the Royal Agricultural Society in the hope of finding a remedy. Milk-recording has shown that many cows are not worth their place in a herd, giving too little milk to pay for the cost of keeping them, and egg-recording shows that many hens do not justify their existence ; the elimination of these unprofitable animals improves the financial position of the farm. Losses of crops due to diseases and pests, while not in Hertfordshire very serious as a rule, are probably high, and not likely to be less than about 10 per cent. of the produce. In all these directions much is being done to help farmers by the Farm Institute and the Rothamsted and other experimental stations.

However much the farmer may improve his output and lower the cost of production, he may still lose all the advantages thus gained by faulty marketing.

Selling is a specialized business which has a deceptive look of simplicity. Unfortunately, every farmer thinks he is a born salesman, and, unfortunately also, when he is up against the skilful buyer he gets the worst of the bargain, to say nothing of the waste of time in the market. Here the overseas farmer has a great advantage. It is impossible for him to sell individually : he has to sell through his big organization, run by a staff of expert business people who can stand up against the big buyers ; in consequence, he gets a larger share of the profits. He can spend his whole time at production, which is his special job, and the selling organization collects, grades and sells his produce, paying him something on the spot and the balance when the sale is completed. The process is highly economical. The New Zealand farmer obtains 75 to 80 per cent. of what the British housewife pays for his dairy produce ; many a British farmer, vainly struggling against the big combine, obtains only 50 per cent. There are, however, signs that our wasteful marketing methods are being

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improved. Milk-selling, now done on contracts made by help of the National Farmers' Union, may before long be put on even better lines for the farmer. The Milk Pool started in Scotland enabled Scottish farmers better to stand up against the retailers and secure some of the profit for themselves : even to sell some of their surplus milk in London, under the very noses of the Hertfordshire dairy farmers, which must have paid them, for no one can accuse the Scottish farmers of producing milk simply to lose money. We had hoped to have had Alderman Langford here to-day discussing Milk Pools ; unfortunately for the Conference—but fortunately perhaps for the farmers—he is prevented from speaking by certain negotiations now in such a position that public announcements are undesirable. Mr Prewett is, however, dealing with the subject.

Egg-marketing is also to be improved. The new arrangements involving the National Mark begin on 1st February. They should greatly stimulate the demand for the home production, and fortunately, too, they necessitate central packing and grading establishments, which should ensure greater profit to the producer than at present.

The selling of wheat may, and we hope will, soon be improved. The Wheat Pool already operates in Canada and Australia ; it is being discussed as possible here. We hoped Captain Morris could discuss the project to-day, but it was deemed undesirable for him to make a public announcement as yet. All these efforts are for the purpose of giving the farmer the benefit of big business resulting from uniformity of supplies, standardization of products, honest grading and expert salesmanship. If only the marketing could be improved, so that the farmer might obtain a better share of what the consumer pays, it should not be difficult to increase the consumption of British farm produce. The tomato-growers had a happy experience of what judicious advertising could do in the way of stimulating demand. The town and city populations take only a fraction of the milk, fruit, vegetables and dairy produce they might well consume, and, with some inducement to produce, farmers could turn out more than they do.

All these improvements and developments must cost money, which at present the farmer has not got. It is hoped, however, that the new Credit Scheme of the Government, which Mr Enfield is explaining, will be helpful. Its purpose is to enable the farmer to obtain credit on the security of his stock direct from the bank instead of indirectly through a merchant. The cost of the credit will be less than at present, and the farmer will not be in the hands of the merchant, as often happens now. Difficulties must arise at the outset, but the method deserves careful trial.