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AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION AND MARKETING IN HERTFORDSHIRE

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THE subject with which Sir John Russell asked me to deal was "Agricultural Production in Hertfordshire," but, on consideration, it seemed that I might more usefully contribute to your discussion if I linked some few observations on production with the allied question of marketing.

Relatively to other counties, Hertfordshire, with a total area of 400,000 acres, is the sixth smallest county in England. It has been referred to as the "back garden of London," in allusion to the market-garden and glass-house industries which have been so largely developed in the Lea Valley, but apart from this its agriculture does not seem to have any noticeable form of specialization. One distinguishing feature, however, is its predominantly arable character. Out of an agricultural area of 307,000 acres some 57½ per cent. are arable and the remainder permanent grass, while just one half of the agricultural area is in farms having 70 per cent. or more of arable land. This is by no means so high a proportion as in some other eastern counties—Cambridge, Suffolk and Norfolk, for example—but it is, of course, far above the majority. There were, in fact, only eight other counties having 50 per cent. of their area in these mainly arable holdings.

In common with other eastern counties there has been a gradual slow movement towards a greater proportion of pasture-land. In 1870, instead of 57½ per cent., the proportion of arable was almost exactly 74 per cent. The tendency in this direction has perhaps been less rapid than in some other districts, but there have been some noteworthy changes; thus in 1870 there were some 150,700 acres of corn-land instead of the 94,700 cultivated last year—a decline of 37 per cent. In the same period wheat has fallen from 60,500 to 43,100 acres, and barley from 46,900 to 16,500 acres. This fall in barley-growing is not attributable to the decline in the consumption of beer, as, twenty years ago, in 1908, the area under this crop was only 20,700 acres. Another noticeable change is in the relative abandonment of root-growing, which in its turn is due to the decline in arable sheep-farming. In 1870 some 33,400 acres were devoted to turnips, swedes and mangolds, while at the present time the area is less than 8000 acres. Permanent pasture, on the other hand, has risen from 86,100 to 131,100 acres. Only just over 1000 acres were planted with sugar-beet in 1928, but cabbage, brussels sprouts and cauliflower accounted for 3600 acres.

Turning to live stock, the numbers kept in proportion to the area are generally below the average. For example, notwithstanding its proximity

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to the milk market of London, cow-keeping and milk-producing are by no means so important in Herts as in many other counties of England. On the contrary, the density of the cow population, which was 72 per 1000 acres, compares with an average for the whole of England and Wales of 105. In this respect, however, the position is analogous to counties in the east of England. In the same way the number of "other cattle" is also low, so that whilst the number of cattle of all kinds (including cows) in Herts was 148 for each 1000 acres, in England and Wales, as a whole, it was 239—a difference which is perhaps worth consideration. Although the numbers are still relatively low, there has been an increase since 1870.

Against this increase must be set the decline in sheep, which have fallen from 198,000 in 1870 to 68,800 in 1928. This change is common to the Eastern Counties, where sheep were formerly an important factor in the farming system. In fact, sheep-raising has held its own only in those counties in England and Wales where costs are low owing to the existence of extensive mountain-grazings.

In regard to pigs, Hertford has fewer in proportion to its size than some of its neighbours—Suffolk and Cambridge, for example—but the figure of 111 per 1000 acres is fairly close to the average for the whole country.

With the suburbs of London extending almost into the county itself, it is only natural that egg and poultry production in Hertfordshire should be carried on fairly extensively, but even in this branch of agriculture the number of fowls and other poultry per 1000 acres is less than the average for the country—a fact that seems on the face of it rather surprising. The number of fowls is, however, rapidly increasing: thus in 1924 it was 1022 per 1000 acres, while by 1928 it had risen to 1429.

To discuss in detail the production of the crops and live stock would take too long, and might not prove very profitable, but there is one feature of crop production in the county which is rather noticeable, and that is, that with the solitary exception of oats the average yield per acre of all the crops, including seeds and meadow-hay, is below the average for England and Wales. This may not sound very complimentary to Hertfordshire, but no doubt there are good practical reasons to explain it.

Without entering into the details of production, it may be of interest to attempt to estimate the average annual value. In the case of some crops—such as wheat, which is nearly all sold off the farm—this presents no difficulty. But other crops may be largely used for feeding, and if we estimate the output of live stock—such as meat, milk, poultry, eggs and wool—we are bound to ignore the production of feeding-crops, otherwise they would be counted twice. The estimate refers, therefore, only to products sold off the farm for consumption elsewhere, though it also includes an allowance for consumption in farm households. Obviously, in a calculation of this sort there is a large margin of error, both as regards the actual quantities which should be taken into consideration and as

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regards the value which should be assigned to them, and each of these varies again from year to year. But, allowing for a considerable degree of inaccuracy, the estimate is perhaps interesting, as it gives some idea of the relative importance of the different products as a source of revenue to the average farmer :

Cattle, sheep and pigs	£585,000
Milk and dairy produce	480,000
Eggs and poultry	170,000
Other live stock products	45,000
Wheat and barley	415,000
Potatoes	96,000
Other farm crops	134,000
Fruit and vegetables	175,000
Glass-house produce	500,000

£2,600,000

On this estimate, the annual average value of the production of the county is about £2,600,000, of which £500,000 is derived from the specialized glass-house industry. If we exclude this, live stock forms the principal source of revenue on the ordinary agricultural side, with milk in the second place and wheat and barley in the third. The live-stock group of products accounts for about 60 per cent. of the total ordinary agricultural production, while the farm-crop group, including fruit and vegetables, contributes the balance. Proportionately to the area, these figures are somewhat below the average for England and Wales—a result which naturally follows from the fact that Hertfordshire carries less live stock per acre than the average, the receipts from the farm crops sold not being sufficient to make up the difference.

This brief outline may possibly raise some points for discussion. To an outside observer, such as myself, the proximity of the London market naturally suggests opportunities for development in the supply of milk, poultry and eggs, potatoes and vegetables ; also in live stock—particularly, perhaps, pigs. But, quite apart from any increase in production, which in itself costs money, there is the possibility of better marketing, and it may be that a partial solution of the problem of getting a satisfactory return for the labour and capital devoted to raising produce is to be found in the adoption of an improved marketing system.

Marketing is the twin sister of production, and they should go hand in hand, but standardization, which is the basis of trade in most commodities, is hardly known in British agriculture, although competing imported supplies are almost invariably standardized as to grade, pack and package. This applies even to such commodities as chilled Argentine beef and New Zealand lamb, while, as is well known, imported bacon, cheese, butter, eggs, wheat and fruit are always put on the market in recognized grades.

In this country, owing to the individual character of agriculture,

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farmers generally grow crops or breed stock without any very definite information as to the needs of the market. Each individual farmer has his own opinion as to what will fetch the best price, but there have hitherto been no clearly accepted standards or grades, recognized by both buyer and seller, as defining quality, and hence as regulating price. We see the result in the multiplicity of sorts and varieties of the same commodities which are offered for sale, and it is just this multiplicity of sorts and varieties which is one of the great obstacles to the successful marketing of British produce. Primarily, it is an obstacle because it hinders commercial dealings, makes the settlement of prices difficult, and means that English produce has always to be dealt with in small lots because each consignment is different from the next; but it is a drawback also because the producer is uncertain what are the particular classes of article which will regularly and on the average fetch the best prices. Whereas, if producers knew exactly what the buyer wanted, and the grade which would be likely to realize the best price, they could aim more successfully at increasing their proportion of best-grade produce. A larger proportion of first-class produce fetching top prices might make an appreciable difference in your estimate of profits, and although to secure this must necessarily demand more care and trouble, it would not perhaps involve any corresponding increase in costs of production.

It has been the pride of the British farmer in the past that his produce was the best in the world, and no doubt this is true of a proportion of the output, but at present there is a great deal that cannot claim to be first, and is even of doubtful second, quality. Is not one means of combating agricultural depression to be found in the production of more top-grade stuff?

The first step lies in the settlement of definitions of quality grades. This is not a task which can be undertaken by the individual farmer—agreement must be reached by representatives, both of producers and distributors—and in this direction a great advance is being made at the present time. The Agricultural Produce (Grading and Marking) Act, which was passed last year, enables grades to be defined, and in consultation with the National Farmers' Union, and with representatives of the merchants, dealers, and others who are engaged in the sale of the produce after it has left the farmer, grades have been settled for some commodities and others are under consideration. Moreover, in connection with the settlement of grades, which is the first step, schemes are in hand whereby goods sold in accordance with defined grades may also have the advantage of using a National Mark, which is both an advertisement of English produce and an outward and visible sign of guaranteed origin and reliability. This National Mark promises to be a most valuable asset to the home producer by giving the distributive trades in the large markets a token which will engender confidence and stimulate a demand for English agricultural produce.

A scheme applying to apples and pears was brought into operation in

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the autumn of last year and has proved very successful, and a scheme for tomatoes and cucumbers—which is of special interest to this county—and for eggs will be working shortly, while schemes for potatoes, plums, strawberries, and dressed poultry will, it is hoped, be launched this year. Live stock and grain present special difficulties, but means of improving the marketing methods of these are receiving the close consideration both of the Ministry and of the National Farmers' Union.

In the time at my disposal I cannot enlarge on this subject, and indeed it is not necessary, as you are about to hear a paper explaining the egg-marketing scheme which will give you a good idea of the principles and methods underlying the attempts to improve the marketing of agricultural produce.

In conclusion, I would emphasize the connection between production and marketing. Under modern conditions, when the British market is supplied with produce from all parts of the world, the farmer cannot be content just to take his produce to market and expect that he will necessarily get the best prices. That was perhaps the case fifty years ago, but something more is necessary to-day. He needs to study the market and to find out what is the exact grade and class of article for which the best price is given. He can then, on the one hand, aim at the production of that particular grade on his own farm, and by organization with other farmers he should be able to secure its sale on satisfactory lines.