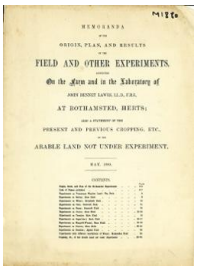
Memoranda of the Field Experiments at Rothamsted: May 1880



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Rothamsted Research

Rothamsted Research (1881) *Origin, Scope, and Plan of the Rothamsted Experiments ;* Memoranda Of The Field Experiments At Rothamsted: May 1880, pp 3 - 5 **- DOI: https://doi.org/10.23637/ERADOC-1-244**

ORIGIN, SCOPE, AND PLAN,

OF THE

ROTHAMSTED EXPERIMENTS.

THE following statement of the origin, scope, and plan, of the Rothamsted Investigations, was drawn up in answer to a circular letter issued by a Committee appointed to arrange for the commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the establishment of the First Experimental Station in Germany (Möckern), which was held in Leipzig in September 1877. The precise form of the statement depended on the order and form of the questions to which it is an answer. It has already been published in German, almost in full, with the series of reports of other Experimental Stations, which was issued at the time of the Jubilee Meeting.[1] It has been thought that it would be of some interest as an introduction to the *Memoranda of the Plan and Results of the Field Experiments*, &c., annually issued at Rothamsted, and which here follow it. To the general statement, which, with a few slight alterations correcting it up to date, is given in the form in which it was originally drawn up, are appended lists of the titles of all the papers already published, with full reference to the Journals in which they appeared.

Mr. Lawes was the founder of the Rothamsted Experimental Station. He commenced experiments with different manuring substances, first with plants in pots, and afterwards in the field, soon after entering into possession of his hereditary property at Rothamsted[2] in 1834. The researches of De Saussure on vegetation were the chief subjects of his study to this end. Of all the experiments so made, those in which the neutral phosphate of lime, in bones, bone-ash, and apatite, was rendered soluble by means of sulphuric acid, and the mixture applied for root-crops, gave the most striking results. The results obtained on a small scale in 1837, 1838, and 1839, were such as to lead to more extensive trials in the field in 1840 and 1841, and subsequently.

In 1843 more systematic field experiments were commenced; and a barn, which had previously been partially applied to to laboratory purposes, became almost exclusively devoted to agricultural investigations. The foundation of the Rothamsted Experimental Station may be said to date from that time (1843).

The Rothamsted station has up to the present time been entirely disconnected from any external organization, and has been maintained entirely by Mr. Lawes. He has further set apart a sum of £100,000, and certain areas of land, for the continuance of the investigations after his death.

In 1854-5 a new laboratory was built, by public subscription of agriculturists, and presented to Mr. Lawes, in July 1855, from which date the old barn-laboratory was abandoned, and the new one has been occupied.

From June 1843, up to the present time, Dr. J. H. Gilbert has been associated with Mr. Lawes, and has had the direction of the laboratory.

The number of assistants and other helps has increased from time to time. At first only one laboratory man was employed; but very soon a chemical assistant was necessary, and next a computer and record-keeper.

During the last twenty-five years the staff has consisted of—

One or two, and sometimes three, chemists.

Two or three general assistants. One of these is usually employed in routine chemical work, but sometimes in more general work. The chief occupation of the general assistants is to superintend the field experiments—that is, the making of the manures, the measurement of the plots, the application of the manures, and the harvesting of the crops; also the taking of samples, the preparation of them for preservation or analysis, and the determinations of dry matter, ash, &c. These assistants also superintend any experiments made with animals. There are now more than 25,000 bottles of samples of experimentally-grown vegetable produce, of animal products, of ashes, or of soils, stored in the laboratory.

A botanical assistant is also occasionally employed, with from three to six boys under him, and with him is generally associated one of the permanent general assistants, who at other times undertakes the botanical work.

Two or three (for some time past three) computers and record-keepers have been occupied in calculating and tabulating field, feeding, and laboratory results, copying, &c.

One, and sometimes two, laboratory men are employed.

Besides the permanent laboratory staff, chemical assistance is frequently engaged in London, or elsewhere; and, in this way, for some years past, Mr. R. Richter, of Berlin, has been almost constantly occupied with analytical work sent from Rothamsted.

The field experiments, and occasionally feeding experiments, also employ a considerable but a very variable number of agricultural labourers.

Nothing has been done at Rothamsted in the way of manure-, feeding-stuff-, or seed-control.

The investigations may be classed under two heads:—

I.—FIELD EXPERIMENTS, EXPERIMENTS ON VEGETATION, ETC.

The general scope and plan of the field experiments has been:—

To grow some of the most important crops of rotation, each separately, year after year, for many years in succession on the same land, without manure, with farmyard-manure, and with a great variety of chemical manures; the same description of manure being, as a rule, applied year after year on the same plot. Experiments on an actual course of rotation, with different manures, have also been made. In this way field experiments have been conducted as follows:—

(1) Die landwirthschaftlichen Versuchs-Stationen. Band xxii. 1877.

(2) Rothamsted is in Hertfordshire, twenty-five miles from London, on the Midland Railway; station, Harpenden.

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On Wheat, thirty-seven years in succession; 13 acres, 35 plots, many of which are duplicates of others.

On Barley, twenty-nine years in succession; $4\frac{1}{2}$ acres, 23 (or 29) plots.

On Oats, ten years (including one year fallow); $\frac{3}{4}$ acre, 6 plots.

On Wheat, alternated with fallow, twenty-nine years; 1 acre, 2 plots.

On different descriptions of Wheat, thirteen years; 4–8 acres (each year in a different field), now more than 20 plots.

On Beans, thirty-two years (including one year Wheat and five years fallow); $1\frac{1}{4}$ acre, 10 plots. Also twenty-seven years; 5 plots, 1 acre.

On Beans, alternated with Wheat, twenty-eight years; 1 acre 10 plots.

On Clover, with fallow or a corn-crop intervening, twenty-six years; 3 acres, 18 plots. The land afterwards devoted to experiments with various Leguminous plants.

On Turnips, twenty-eight years (including three years' barley); about 8 acres, 40 plots.

On Sugar Beet, five years; about 8 acres, 40 plots.

On Mangel Wurzel, five years (in progress); about 8 acres, 40 plots.

On Potatos, five years (in progress); 2 acres, 10 plots.

On Rotation, thirty-three years; about $2\frac{1}{2}$ acres, 12 plots.

On permanent Grass-land, twenty-five years; about 7 acres, 22 plots.

Comparative experiments with different manures have also been made on other descriptions of soil, in other localities.

Samples of all the experimental crops are taken, and brought to the laboratory. Weighed portions of each are partially dried, and preserved for future reference or analysis. Duplicate weighed portions of each are dried at 100° C., the dry matter determined, and then burnt to ash on platinum sheets in cast-iron muffles. The quantities of ash are determined and recorded, and the ashes themselves are preserved for reference, or analysis.

In a large proportion of the samples the nitrogen is determined; and in some the amount existing as albuminoids.

In selected cases, illustrating the influence of season, manures, exhaustion, &c., complete ash-analyses have been made, numbering in all more than 600.

Also in selected cases, illustrating the influence of season and manuring, quantities of the experimentally-grown Wheat grain have been sent to the mill, and the proportion and composition of the different mill-products determined.

In the Sugar Beet, Mangel Wurzel, and Potatos, the sugar in the juice has in most cases been determined by polariscope, and frequently by copper also.

In the case of the experiments on the mixed herbage of permanent grass land, besides the samples taken for the determination of chemical composition (dry matter, ash, nitrogen, woody fibre, fatty matter, and composition of ash), carefully averaged samples have frequently been taken for the determination of the botanical composition. In this way, on four occasions, at intervals of five years—viz., in 1862, 1867, 1872, and 1877—a sample of the produce of each plot was taken, and submitted to careful botanical separation, and the percentage, by weight, of each species in the mixed herbage determined. Partial separations have also been made in other years.

Investigation of Soils.

Samples of the soils of most of the experimental plots have been taken from time to time, generally to the depth of 9, 18, and 27 inches, but sometimes to twice this depth. In this way about 600 samples have been taken, submitted to partial mechanical separation, and portions of the mould have been carefully prepared and preserved for analysis. In a large proportion of the samples the loss on drying at different temperatures, and at ignition, has been determined. In most the nitrogen determinable by burning with soda-lime has been estimated. In some the carbon, and in some the nitrogen as nitric acid, have been determined. Some experiments have also been made on the comparative absorptive capacity (for water and ammonia) of different soils and subsoils. The systematic investigation of the amount, and condition, of the nitrogen, and of some of the more important mineral constituents, of the soils of the different plots, and from different depths, is now in progress or contemplated.

Rainfall and Drainage.

Almost from the commencement of the experiments the rainfall has been measured—for twenty-seven years in a gauge of one-thousandth of an acre area, as well as in an ordinary small funnel-gauge of 5 inches diameter. From time to time the nitrogen, as ammonia and as nitric acid, has been determined in the rain waters. The chlorine has, also, in some cases been determined.

Three "drain gauges," also of one-thousandth of an acre each, for the determination of the quantity and composition of the water percolating respectively through 20 inches, 40 inches, and 60 inches depth of soil (with its subsoil in natural state of consolidation) have also been constructed. A more numerous series of smaller "drain gauges," arranged for the investigation of the influence of different crops, and of different manures, has been constructed; but they have been found to be not sufficiently water-tight. Each of the differently manured plots of the permanent experimental Wheat-field having a separate pipe-drain, the drainage-waters have been and are frequently collected and analysed.

Professor Frankland has determined the nitrogen, as ammonia, as nitric acid, and as organic nitrogen, and also some other constituents, in many samples both of the rain and of the various drainage waters collected at Rothamsted. Dr. Voelcker also has determined the combined nitrogen, and likewise the incombustible constituents, in many of the drainage waters.

The nitrogen existing as nitric acid, sometimes that in other forms, and also some other constituents, are, and for some time past have been, determined periodically, in both the rain and the various drainage waters.

Amount of Water Transpired by Plants.

For several years in succession, experiments were made to determine the amount of water given off by plants during their growth. In this way various plants, including representatives of the gramineous, the leguminous, and other families, have been experimented upon. Similar experiments have also been made with various trees.

Botanical Characteristics, &c.

Having regard to the difference in the character and amount of the constituents assimilated by plants of different botanical relationships, under equal external conditions, or by the same description of plants, under varying conditions, observations have been made on the character and range of the roots of different plants, and on their relative development of stem, leaf, &c. In the case of various crops, but more especially with Wheat and Beans, samples have been taken at different stages of growth, and the composition determined, in more or less detail, sometimes of the entire plant, and sometimes of the separated parts. In a few cases the amounts of dry matter, ash, nitrogen, &c., in the above-ground growth of a given area, at different stages of development, have been determined. The amounts of stubble of different crops have also occasionally been estimated.

https://doi.org/10.23637/ERADOC-1-244

Assimilation of Free Nitrogen.

Experiments were made for several years in succession to determine whether plants assimilate free or uncombined nitrogen, and also various collateral points. Plants of the gramineous, the leguminous, and of other families were operated upon. The late Dr. Pugh took a prominent part in this inquiry.

II.—EXPERIMENTS ON ANIMALS, Etc.

Experiments with the animals of the farm were commenced early in 1847, and have been continued, at intervals, up to the present time.

The following points have been investigated:—

1. The amount of food, and of its several constituents, consumed in relation to a given live weight of animal within a given time.

2. The amount of food, and of its several constituents, consumed to produce a given amount of increase in live weight.

3. The proportion, and relative development, of the different organs or parts of different animals.

4. The proximate and ultimate composition of the animals in different conditions as to age and fatness, and the probable composition of their increase in live weight during the fattening process.

5. The composition of the solid and liquid excreta (the manure) in relation to that of the food consumed.

6. The loss or expenditure of constituents by respiration and the cutaneous exhalations—that is, in the mere sustenance of living meat-and-manure-making machine.

The general plan of experimenting was as follows:—

To provide data as to the amount of food, or its several constituents, consumed in relation to a given live weight of animal within a given time, and to produce a given amount of increase in live weight, several hundred animals—oxen, sheep, and pigs—have been experimented upon. Selected lots of animals were supplied, for many weeks, or for months consecutively, with weighed quantities of foods, selected and allotted according to the special point under inquiry. The composition of the foods was determined by analysis. The weights of the animals were taken at the commencement, at intervals during the progress, and at the conclusion of the experiment.

The amount, and relative development, of the different organs and parts were determined in two calves, two heifers, fourteen bullocks, one lamb, 249 sheep, and fifty-nine pigs.

The percentage of water, mineral matter, fat, and nitrogenous substance, were determined in certain separated parts, and in the entire bodies, of ten animals—namely, one calf, two oxen one lamb, four sheep, and two pigs. Complete analyses of the ashes, respectively, of the entire carcases, of the mixed internal and other offal parts, and of the entire bodies, of each of these ten animals have also been made.

From the data provided, as just described, as to the chemical composition of the different descriptions of animal, in different conditions as to age and fatness, the composition of the increase whilst fattening, and the relation of the constituents stored up in increase to those consumed in food, have been estimated.

To ascertain the composition of the manure in relation to that of the food consumed, oxen, sheep, and pigs have been experimented upon.

In the case of oxen, the food and litter (sometimes with an acid absorbent), were weighed, sampled, and analysed; the animals were fed in boxes, for periods of from five to nine weeks, and the total dung produced was well mixed, weighed, sampled, and analysed. The constituents determined in the food and litter on the one hand, and in the dung on the other, were dry matter, ash, and nitrogen.

In the case of sheep no litter was used; the animals were kept in lots of five, on rafters, through which (but with some little loss) the solid and liquid excreta passed on to a sheet-zinc flooring at such an incline that the liquid drained off at once into carboys containing acid, and the solid matter was removed two or three times daily, and also mixed with acid. The constituents determined in the food and manure were dry matter, mineral matter, sometimes woody fibre, and nitrogen.

In the case of pigs, individual male animals were experimented upon, each for periods of three, five, or ten days only. Each animal was kept in a frame, preventing it from turning round, and having a zinc bottom, with an outlet for the liquid to run into a bottle, and it was watched night and day, and the voidings carefully collected as soon as passed, which could easily be done, as the animal never passed either fæces or urine without getting up, and in getting up he rang a bell, and so attracted the notice of the attendant. The constituents determined were, in the food and fæces, dry matter, ash and nitrogen, and in the urine, dry matter, ash, nitrogen, and urea.

The loss or expenditure of constituents, by respiration and the cutaneous exhalations, has not been determined directly, that is by means of a respiration-apparatus, but only by difference, that is, by calculation, founded on the amounts of dry matter, ash, and nitrogen, in the food, and in the (increase) fæces, and urine.

Independently of the points of inquiry above enumerated, the results obtained have supplied data for the consideration of the following questions:—

1. The characteristic demands of the animal body (for nitrogenous or non-nitrogenous contituents of food) in the exercise of muscular power.

2. The sources in the food of the fat produced in the animal body.

3. The comparative characters of animal and vegetable food in human dietaries.

Supplementary Investigations.

In conjunction with Professor Way, an extensive investigation was undertaken on the application of town sewage to different crops, but especially to grass. The amount, and the composition, of both the sewage and the produce grown were determined; and, in selected cases, the composition of the land drainage-water was also determined. Comparative experiments were also made on the feeding qualities of the differently grown produce; the amount of increase yielded by oxen, and the amount and composition of the milk yielded by cows, being determined. In this inquiry part of the analytical work was performed at Rothamsted, but most of it by Professor Way in London.

The chemistry of the malting process, the loss of food constituents during its progress, and the comparative feeding value of barley and malt, have been investigated.

Although many of the results of the investigations above enumerated have already been published, a large proportion as yet remains unpublished.

https://doi.org/10.23637/ERADOC-1-244