

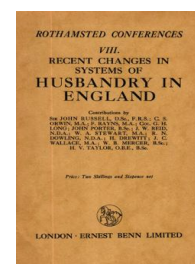
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CHANGES IN HUSBANDRY

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RECENT CHANGES IN CHESHIRE HUSBANDRY

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FROM an agricultural standpoint Cheshire can be divided into two portions—north and south. The latter is nearly all heavy grass devoted to cheese and milk-selling. North Cheshire is, from the viewpoint of the present Conference, more interesting, though even here it is lack of change rather than change which I have to record.

There is much light free working soil, which alone is cultivated, and the 30 inches of rainfall is well distributed, so that a wide range of cropping is possible. Dairying has from time immemorial been the feature of the area, and the rapid development of the great market of Lancashire has confirmed the practice. This market offers an outlet for other farm produce too. Potatoes (which can be harvested from mid-June onwards), corn, straw and hay are all saleable. Town manure is still available—and for many years Irish labour has flocked hither for the potato crop.

Typically the farms are small—we call 200 acres a large farm, and in all Cheshire there are only sixty-seven holdings over 300 acres—and worked by a family with or without a small permanent staff of labour, plus Irish labour in summer-time for the potato crop on the larger holdings. The head of a family farm is apt to look askance at modern views on labour and labour costing. To him his small staff, whether paid in cash or kind, is like the rent—a fixed overhead charge. Even the potato crop on a small farm is part of the routine, while on the larger farms it is an affair of so much Irish labour and may be considered apart from the farm altogether. For the rest, every proposition concerning the management of the land resolves itself into this—can it or can it not be compassed by the permanent staff? Anything which they can do is not looked upon as costing anything, since the dairy herd necessitates a certain staff, and that staff is available for other work in any case. On the other hand no change of cropping which requires extra labour is likely to be very acceptable. I think it is probably true to say that cost of food-stuffs for dairy cattle is with us a greater source of anxiety than labour. Every crop, however, offers two distinct alternatives—direct sale or utilization by dairy stock. It is unlikely that any crop will fail in both directions, hence cropping systems are likely to remain fairly stable; food-stuffs for cattle which can be produced on the farm and thus reduce heavy cost of purchased cakes are likely to be very popular. Cropping changes therefore are likely to be of a minor rather than a major character.

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The position as regards area under grass is as follows :—

<i>Arable and Grass Land</i>	<i>Per Cent. Permanent Grass</i>	
	1915	1928
Cheshire County	62·43	65·3
Six Northern Petty Sessional Divisions only	47·8	46·5

Rotation.—I can detect no noteworthy change in rotational systems. The arable area is all under five or six years' rotation, with grass occupying two or three years. Here and there rapid conversion of poor old permanent turf to new grass by ploughing and immediate reseedling is now resorted to. We have been very successful with this method on a poor farm in the smoke-damaged area east of Manchester.

Corn-growing.—The area under corn does not alter greatly. In discussing this we have to remember that farmyard manure is produced in such large quantities as to be a by-product on many farms, and that, where short, it is often supplemented by town dung. Hence a good yield is not difficult to attain.

Oats.—Whether taken after lea or after heavily dunged roots the danger of lodging is very great, hence we greatly favour a variety which will stand. For this reason Marvellous oats have attained to great popularity despite their coarseness. The Swedish varieties crop heavily and are far better quality, but even these valuable attributes scarcely give them a position above Marvellous. Winter oats gained greatly in popularity during the first years after the war on account of the season of sowing, earliness of ripening, and their power of suppressing annual weeds such as charlock, but two winters of severe frosts have driven most people back to very early sowing in spring.

All straw crops are valuable to us as litter.

Wheat.—The demands of the poultry market and the reasons I have already referred to make wheat a profitable crop. Indeed, save that we are prone to sow too late—a result of following potatoes or roots—and to get a poor crop in consequence, I should say wheat is as profitable as any crop we can grow except potatoes. Our damp winters, with alternations of frost and thaw, are a serious handicap, and winter hardiness is therefore the first requirement of a variety. At Reaseheath we have tested a large number, but cannot find anything so *safe* as the local standard variety, Standard Red. In most years some one variety will surpass it in yield, but over a period of years it would undoubtedly stand first.

In the root section a definite alteration is to be observed—I think it is the one legacy of the arable dairying campaign—and that is marrow-stem kale. Both as a self crop and as a second crop after early potatoes it has now become a thoroughly established minor crop. We at Reaseheath can find nothing better for autumn feed for dairy stock.

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There are several noteworthy features in connection with potato cultivation. Everyone admits the superior cropping power of Scotch seed—we all buy a certain amount every year. But a good many of our potatoes are for the early market, and in this business earliness is at least of as great consequence as weight of crop. It is commonly held by the early growers that “once grown” seed gives a crop which is marketable earlier than that from Scotch seed. I believe this is true, though I have not established it experimentally. Certainly the seed sprouts much earlier.

Our method of growing earlies, involving a half splitting of the drills after farmyard manure has been carted in and marking of the furrows with a holing machine prior to planting, represents, I think, a recent local evolution—at any rate I have not seen the method elsewhere. As regards use of machinery in lifting, a census would probably show definite retrogression. I certainly know a good many farmers who own spinners, but will not use them.

A very interesting situation has developed in the past three years over manuring of earlies. We apply large quantities of artificials to the open drills before the sets are planted. Three years' trials at Reaseheath and at other centres in the county have all gone to show that no combination of artificials we can devise materially alters the yield in the early stages—indeed many dressings seem to check it, so for the time being we are rather in a quandary. I think the explanation lies in the manner of application. Of course considerable increases are obtainable in the case of crops lifted late in the season.

Sugar-beet has been tried over a fair area, but with labour and other costs approximating to those of potatoes, and maximum receipts in the region of £30 per acre, most farmers who have tried the crop in an experimental way incline to return to their earlier love. Certainly sugar-beet is not on the increase; only 152 acres were grown in Cheshire in 1927, and of this one-third in the purely dairy-farming area, around Nantwich.

FRUIT AND VEGETABLES AS AN ADJUNCT TO THE FARM

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THE association of the above crops seems to suggest either that fruit and vegetable growing has been adopted on the farms when the recent changes in husbandry took place, or that these crops are ripe for adoption when such changes are made. Past experience shows that a continuance of years economically bad to the grower