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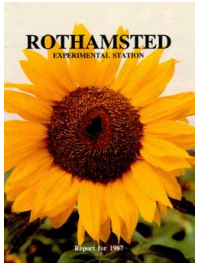
Rothamsted Experimental Station Report for 1987

Full Table of Content



Introduction

Rothamsted Research

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INTRODUCTION

Sir John Bennet Lawes was experimenting before 1843, but the Rothamsted Experimental Station dates its foundation from this year because he then started his long and fruitful colloboration with J.H. Gilbert and laid down the classical wheat experiment on Broadbalk field. Lawes died in 1900 and Gilbert in 1901: they were succeeded as directors by A.D. Hall (1903–12), E.J. Russell (1912–43), W.G. Ogg (1943–58). F.C. Bawden (1958–72) and L. Fowden (1973–).

For long the Station was financed wholly by Lawes, at first directly and after 1889 from the fund of £100 000 with which he endowed the Lawes Agricultural Trust. In 1906 Mr J.F. Mason paid for a bacteriological laboratory to be built, and in 1907 the Goldsmiths' Company provided an endowment of £10 000. The first public money came in 1911 from the Development Commission, and since then government grants have been made annually; now the work is largely financed by the Agricultural and Food Research Council.

The experimental fields at first amounted to only about 20 ha, which were worked from the Rothamsted Home Farm, but in 1913 this farm of 100 ha was rented by the Station and the first farm buildings were put up on the site of the present range. In 1934 the Manor House, Home Farm, the site of the laboratories and various other parts of the estate, were bought by the Lawes Agricultural Trust for £35 000, raised entirely by voluntary subscriptions. Since then some additional land and other houses have been acquired, and in 1965 Scout Farm was bought, bringing the total area to more than 300 ha, of which half are suitable for field experiments. In 1952 the Manor House was opened as a hostel for visitors and members of staff.

Research work at Crawley Mill Farm, Woburn, was started by the Royal Agricultural Society of England in 1876. Lawes and Gilbert were consulted about the experiments from the start, and some experiments done on the heavy land at Harpenden were duplicated there. After the Royal Agricultural Society withdrew its support form Woburn in 1921 the experiments there were supervised from Rothamsted, and in 1926, with the transfer of the lease to the Lawes Agricultural Trust Committee, Woburn Experimental Station formally became part of Rothamsted. In addition to providing a valuable contrast of soil type, the land at Woburn allows experiments with crops not easily grown at Harpenden.

There is still need to do experiments at many other places, however, for different as these two farms are, they are far from representing all the major types of soils and climates in Britain. Research is done at two places in Suffolk. Broom's Barn Farm (73ha) at Higham, Bury St. Edmunds, was acquired in 1959 by the Lawes Agricultural Trust Committee. An experimental station was established there in 1961, to continue the research into sugar-beet manuring and diseases previously done mainly at a field station at Dunholme. It was paid for, as in the work of the station, by the Ministry of Agriculture's Sugar Beet Research and Education Fund. In 1964 Rothamsted became responsible for the crop-rotation experiments started in 1899 by the East Suffolk County Council at Saxmundham.

Although a range of problems was studied before 1900, the work was mostly chemical, and only few workers were engaged. With increasing numbers of staff in the early 1900s, the activities also widened and Departments of Botany, Soil Microbiology and Physics separated from the original Chemistry Department before 1914, and soon after the end of the First World War new Departments of Entomology, Plant Pathology, Insecticides and Fungicides, and Statistics were started.

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The Station's activities then expanded little after the Second World War when most departments increased in size, and new ones were created for Bees (which merged with Entomology in 1972), Pedology, Biochemistry, Nematology and Computing. Molecular Structures was added in 1972 and disbanded in 1984. The Chemistry and Pedology Departments were amalgamated to form the Soils and Plant Nutrition Department in 1977. The Station's research was reorganized in 1983 when the 33 scientific departments were grouped into five larger divisions and then again in 1987 when they were grouped into four divisions. As part of the earlier changes the Botany, Computer and Physics Departments were dissolved and a Physiology and Environmental Physics Department and a Computing Unit were formed. The most recent reorganization has merged the Entomology and Nematology Departments and the Soils and Plant Nutrition, Soil Microbiology, Soil Microbiology, Field Experiments and Farms into a single Soils Department. Physiology and Environmental Physics (and part of the former Soils and Plant Nutrition Department) has become the Crop Production Department.

In 1985 large scale organizational changes took place throughout the Agricultural and Food Research Service and Rothamsted became the largest component of a newly constituted Institute of Arable Crops.

The CAB International Bureau of Soils, formerly the Commonweath Bureau of Soils which had been housed at Rothamsted since its establishment in 1929 moved to new headquarters at Wallingford, Oxfordshire, in 1987.

The Soil Survey of England and Wales whose headquarters had been at Rothamsted since 1946, became the Soil Survey and Land Research Centre and moved to the Silsoe campus of the Cranfield Institute of Technology in 1987.

Members of staff and visiting workers with appropriate qualifications can undertake research leading to a higher degree, usually under the provisions of the Public Research Institutes' registration scheme of London University.

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