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THE PATTERN OF LAND OWNERSHIP AND FARMING IN GRASBY DURING THE C19th

In his book "*Large and Small Holdings: A study of English Agricultural Economics*", published in 1903, Herman Levy describes the early C19th as a period of "engrossing of farms" i.e. amalgamation of small to make larger farms. He says that the farmhouses of small holders were often allowed to fall into disrepair, let to labourers (often 3 families to a house), or demolished by landlords. This process was hastened by enclosure where small holders, even if given an award, got too little to keep their livestock with the loss of common land.

The yeomen of England, with relatively small farms, often sold their land in order to become tenants of much larger farms, taking on "improving leases" i.e. they benefited from improvements they made themselves. Many small holders, however, lost or sold their land and became day labourers.

Although the Caistor Moor enclosure appears to have been completed by 1814, the enclosure of the open fields of Grasby dragged on until 1844. As late as 1842 those liable for a further enclosure payment of £628.17.8 were challenging this sum 25 years after the act was passed, during which time three commissioners had died and the problem had been compounded by poor accounting and record keeping (*Stamford Mercury*, July 1842). It's not certain, therefore, how these delays affected the development of farming in the village during the first half of the C19th. During this period the largest landowner was initially John Turner, then his devisees George Tennyson and Philip Skipworth, followed eventually by Charles (Tennyson) Turner when he inherited the Rev. Samuel Turner's estate.

The most important tenant farmer during this time appears to have been Francis Isles who was put in by Thomas Dixon of Holton-le-Moor in 1818 to farm George Tennyson's land at a rate of 26/- for grass and 25/- for arable land (*Lincolnshire Archives ref: 1 Dixon 9/1/18*). According to the 1826 Poor Rate this totalled 330 acres. In 1837 this land, described as freehold and tithe free, came up for sale when Francis Isles gave up farming. Nearly 238 acres abutted Limber Woods (16 fields) and nearly 92 acres (5 fields) were elsewhere, including land abutting the main drain (North Kelsey Beck). This accords with Rex Russell's map which shows that all the land close to Limber Woods was originally awarded to the devisees of John Turner. The total of 16 fields in the sales particulars suggests, however, that, despite the enclosure of Grasby still being incomplete by 1837, the open fields had already been fenced. As well as the land, Francis himself put up for sale his livestock, including sheep, cattle, horses, implements and a bull. In April the previous year, 1836, the following had been put up for sale at Vicarage Farm: "157 sheep; 17 beasts (including 3 milch cows); 4 working horses, 1 coach horse and 3 youngsters; 4 store pigs; a large selection of farm implements

(nearly new); 2 waggons, 2 carts, 3 ploughs, 3 pairs of harrows, 1 corn drill, a roller, dressing machine, and corn blower.” It’s likely that at this time Francis Isles occupied Vicarage Farm (Glebe Farm today).

This suggests a genuine mixed farm that may have been practising a form of “*high farming*”. High farming was the name given to farming using modern techniques and was sometimes also called “*high feeding*”. It was based on arable farming with high inputs leading to high outputs. Livestock were still important, particularly sheep, but they were integral to the increased output of root and cereal crops. Improved methods led to shorter rotations (four or five years) with heavy use of manure and, increasingly, artificial fertilizers. Cattle tended to be overwintered in sheds and fed on oilcake to produce rich manure, and then sold on in the spring. Sheep were fed on “*seeds*” and turnips in the fields, to which they added their droppings. Wool and meat, particularly from the Lincolnshire Longwool, were important sources of income, and a large and extremely important sheep fair was held at Caistor. But at the heart of this new approach to farming was the intensive production of wheat (normally sown in autumn) and barley for malting (normally sown in spring). The introduction of new and efficient farm machinery was also a vital part of the process. Although Norfolk is credited with the introduction of this new approach, Lincolnshire was seen by the mid C19th to be its greatest exponent.

Writing for the Royal Agricultural Society of England (RASE) in 1890, Dan Pigeon, in a review of the development of agricultural machinery during the C19th, commented: “*Implements shown at the first RASE meeting in Oxford in 1839 were for the most part crude, cumbrous and ill-executed machines, the work of village plough wrights and hedge-side carpenters, men who followed rule of thumb, isolated from fellow craftsmen. From this meeting 23 pioneers, including Ransome, Garrett and Howard, picked each other’s brains and for the first time in 1842, just 3 years later, the manufacture of even the commoner implements had passed out of the hands of village craftsmen and become transferred to makers possessed of great intelligence, skill and capital. It was not until 1848, however, that “trials” of implements, properly so-called, were instituted*”. The main developments of the time were the portable steam engine, a haymaker (1841), combined threshing machine (1843), straw shaker (1845), improved seed drills, sprung carts (1843), Lowcock plough (1845) and drain tile machines.

The horse gradually replaced oxen during the century and the plough, although usually still single furrow, was made of iron and wheeled. The harness was a simple collar and chain traces, with often a back-band attached to keep the chains off the horses’ back legs. A large iron wheel on the plough ran in the furrow and a smaller wheel ran on the unploughed section. The difference between the two could be altered to affect the depth of the furrow. Harrows and seed drills could be pulled by horse, but sowing by hand was still common. There was no real protection against pests and weeds could only be controlled by hand pulling or hoeing. Stone

picking was still an important job, normally carried out by women and children.



The horse gradually replaced oxen

Location & date of photograph unknown

When it came to harvest of hay and cereals, the sickle was replaced by the scythe and later by the horse-drawn mower or reaper. Any moving parts, such as a cutter, had to be mechanically driven by the turning of the implement's wheels. Wheel slip was always, therefore, a factor to be taken into account. Even where mechanical mowers and reapers were used, the headland around every field had to be cut by hand first before the horse could be used.

Just how hard the work was at harvest is well-illustrated by a description of the harvest scene in 1889 by Richard Jeffries: "Next day sent forth its army with their crooked weapons to cut and slay....More men and more men were put on day by day, and women to bind the sheaves....as the wheat fell, the shocks (stooks) rose behind them, low tents of corn. Your skin or mine could not have stood the scratching of the corn, which is stiff and sharp, and the burning sun, which blisters like red-hot iron. No one could stand the harvest-field as a reaper except he had been born to it....Their necks grew black....Their open chests were always bare, and flat, and stark....Their breast bone was burned black, and their arms, tough as ash, seemed cased in leather. They grew visibly thinner in the harvest-field, and shrunk together – all flesh disappearing, and nothing but sinew and muscle remaining. Never was such work So they worked and slaved, and tore at the wheat....the heat, the aches, the illness, the sunstroke, always impending in the air – the stomach hungry again before the meal was over...No song, no

stay – on from morn till night....” This dispels any romantic notions of life in the harvest fields!

Hay was cut, turned (originally by hand, later by a horse-drawn turner) led in on high-sided carts and stacked loose and thatched. It would then be compressed under its own weight, sufficient to need cutting into wedges for use as animal feed with a specially designed and sharp knife. Judging when to stack hay was a skilled job, left too late the hay would be dry and brittle, stacked too early and the centre of the stack could heat to a temperature hot enough to cause the stack to self-ignite. Stacks were often checked with a very long metal pole with a barb at the end to draw out samples of hay from its centre. If the end of the pole and sample were too hot to handle, the stack would have to be dismantled and re-built.

Wheat was ready to be carted in from the fields within days, oats needed to “*stand in stooks for 3 Sundays*” before being brought in and barley had to be turned like hay in the swathe to dry (as the straw retained sap after cutting). Younger men pitched the stooks onto waggons; older men were more often used to build the stacks – slightly easier, but highly skilled work.

Mechanical reapers came into general use in the 1870s, self-sheaving reaper-binders and mowers by the 1880s, as well as elevators. These developments reduced the need for as much migrant labour and the work of women and children (making the bands and tying the sheaves). The latter meant the loss of a “*double wage*” coming into many households.

Stacks were of several designs. “*Pike*” stacks were perfectly round, with the last course (the “*mopin*”) drawing the stack to a point. The top was thatched to keep the rain from spoiling the crop. Each stack was designed to provide for a full day’s threshing work. Other types were “*humble-end*” stacks, rectangular but with rounded corners, and “*gable-end*” stacks, with the ends resembling the gable end of a house.

Threshing, a dirty and noisy job, would normally take place between January and March. Threshing (or thrashing) sets would comprise a portable steam engine, the threshing machine, a straw trusser and an elevator. In the early C20th the cost of a complete set would range from £460 to £1,100. The provision of coal (8 to 12 cwt.) and water (200 to 250 gallons) were the responsibility of the farmer, with sufficient provided to get the tackle to the next farm.



Portable steam engine and thresher at work in the old quarry in Grasby Source: Ifor Barton

On arrival at a farm the engineer and mate would remove the covers, light the engine's fire and check the set's lubrication and belts. Threshing would normally start at 7.00, with a half hour break at 9.30, an hour's lunch at 12.30 and a 5.00 finish. The engineer stayed with the engine while his mate fed the drum on the thresher. Sheaves were pitched from the stack often to women who cut the bindings and passed the corn to the feeder. The straw could be stacked loose, or trussed first before being put onto the elevator (before mechanised trussers, hundreds of bands would be made in advance by farm labourers when the fields were too wet to work). If straw was to be sold off the farm it may, certainly by the C20th, have been baled on the spot using a static baler and wire bands. Otherwise, the straw would be used as bedding for livestock. The grain was bagged, in hessian sacks, and carried away to store.