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THE PATTERN OF LAND USE AND FARMING 1911-1939

The First World War

In the early years of the First World War demand for home produced agricultural goods immediately revived and prices started to rise. Guaranteed minimum prices for some crops were introduced by the government, notably for wheat and oats. Production increased, however, with little change to the acreage of arable land, farmers simply switching from, for example, barley to wheat and oats. Potato cultivation continued to increase. The production of meat, however, was given lower priority. Sheep numbers fell back sharply, dropping below a million in Lincolnshire, down to 822,000 in 1915 (a trend which continued after the war with numbers down to 536,000 in 1937). Cattle numbers changed little during this period, fluctuating around 250,000.

Labour was the greatest problem facing farmers during the war as it was both in short supply and expensive with the introduction of a minimum wage. It was not until 1917 that full-time agricultural workers were exempted from military service, although this was abandoned in 1918 with the heavy losses on the western front.

The war greatly increased the number of tractors on Lincolnshire farms, chiefly through state-sponsored mechanisation. In 1917 the government bought 5,000 Fordson tractors to facilitate the “*ploughing-up of pasture*” campaign. It is at this point interesting to note GH Garrad’s comment made in 1918 that: “*No general purpose agricultural tractor, suitable for all operations on a farm, has yet to be invented, nor does it appear humanly possible that such a tractor can ever exist*”!

The war brought a modest but steady recovery for farming.

Post-war Depression

Prices for agricultural commodities fell rapidly in the early 1920s to between one third and one half of the values in 1918 as free markets resumed. They stabilised for the rest of the decade until the international slump in 1929. Livestock prices fared better than those for arable products, but wool prices remained low. Costs remained high and farmers had little capital to invest in mechanisation to reduce the need for labour.

The Lincoln sheep’s reign as the supreme breed came to an end as the demand for small sheep told against the Lincoln’s virtues of bulk, slow maturity and great fleece. Export sales of breeding stock were also badly affected. The Lincoln, however, just about held its own on the Wolds, but the 330 registered flocks in 1901 were reduced to just 44 by 1947.

The changes knocked the bottom out of sheep-corn husbandry, although it still persisted on the Wolds into the 1930s. The more fertile northern Wolds suffered less than the southern Wolds where the use of artificial fertilizers resulted in some new crops being introduced, such as sugar beet, potatoes and vegetables. Real innovation, however, was left largely to newcomers acquiring land cheaply. Such new farmers may have made their money in other ways than farming and came with capital to invest. The sale of Bentley House Farm in January 1923 provided some insight into farming in Grasby during the 1920s. According to the sales notes:- "*Bentley House Farm is the best holding that has been offered for sale in the district for many years*". In total, the area of land for sale was 126 acres 3 roods and 29 perches, unchanged from the size of the farm in 1910. At only 58 it seemed early for Philip to retire, but he had no son to take over from him, just a daughter, Ethel, who would have been 25 at the time of the sale (she appeared in the 1911 census as a 13 year old, a resident at Gosberton Hall College, a boarding school for girls). His brother, George, however, did have a son, William Clifford, but George moved with his son to be a tenant at Manor Farm (408 acres) in Clixby, sometime during this period, where he still was, when in his 70s, in 1941. William gave up the tenancy in 1954. The outgoings on this farm were nominal, the Land Tax being £1 19s 1d per annum, and it was a tithe free estate. Lot 1 comprised the house and yard (half an acre), 2 fields of permanent pasture (16.8 acres) and 4 arable fields (46.1 acres). Lot 2, a grass paddock (3.5 acres) known as "*Bean Field*" included outgoings of 4s/- and 10s/- per annum respectively to the vicars of Grasby and Wootton for the widows of these parishes (as this field is known as "*Couplands*" today it suggests that it was bought by Charles Coupland in 1923). Lots 1 to 7 were arable fields, all with vacant possession except for Lot 6 "*Allotment Field*" (8.65 acres) which had "*various tenants*". The adjoining field to the north of Lot 6, of almost 10 acres, was still given over to allotments and was glebe land. This "*Allotment Field*", however, had originally been awarded to John Turner at the time of enclosure, later owned by the Tennyson family, and it is interesting to speculate as to why the Markhams had purchased a field that was clearly still tied to the provision of allotments for residents of the parish. The ratio of arable land to permanent pasture on the farm was roughly 5:1, pointing to the normal pattern of the pre-eminence of arable farming in the county. The farm buildings, however, comprised an open crew-yard with 4 boxes, a barn with a slab floor and granary over, 2 stables, 3-stall cow stable, poultry house, hen house and a root and chaff house. Although there is no evidence that all these facilities were in use at the time, it suggests that the farm operated on traditional lines with beasts over-wintered in the crew-yard, almost certainly a flock of sheep and a standard rotation of cereals, seeds and roots. Judging by the crops being grown in the parish less than 20 years later, sugar beet and to a lesser extent potatoes, may have already started slowly to replace turnips.

New Farming 1925-1939

For farmers to succeed in the 1920s and 1930s a fairly strong measure of specialization seems to have been almost a necessity. A royal commission noted in 1919 that *“in Lincolnshire the old traditions have been so largely shaken that, whenever it is possible and a pioneer has been forthcoming, specialist crops have been introduced”*.

Livestock also assumed greater importance throughout the country, including Lincolnshire with the exception of the Fens. The cost of purchased feeds was low and the use of home-grown cereals represented a considerable saving. Livestock management was also more economical of labour.

With the increase in livestock came an increase in permanent pasture. By 1939, the combined acreage in Kesteven and Lindsey was 12.8% greater than in 1918.

Much of the livestock farming continued on established lines. Winter stores and summer pastures remained common practice in the management of cattle. Despite an increase of 9.2% between 1936 and 1939, the sheep population of Lincolnshire in the 1930s was no more than one third of what it had been in the 1870s and two thirds that of 1914. The number of pigs, however, went up from 139,000 in 1925 to 208,000 in 1937. Poultry farming also expanded greatly. Most hens were kept for eggs - cheap motor transport was one of the facilitating agents for this with regular collections being made by lorries calling at farms. Both pig and poultry farming spread into the Wolds, these being among the few new enterprises not handicapped by the poverty of the soil.

While wheat was still in decline, the arable farmer had two positive areas of development in potatoes and sugar beet. Although prices fluctuated wildly for potatoes, and there was the ever-present threat of disease, this was one of the few crops from which farmers could be reasonably sure of a profit, in good years a handsome one. There was almost no competition from imports and, although consumption per head had fallen, population growth meant a still growing market.

Sugar beet provided a new opportunity for farmers. Expansion was slow at first, but in 1925 the government introduced a subsidy and, together with the building of processing factories at Brigg, Bardney, Newark and Spalding, the county's area under beet rose from 162 acres in 1920 to 16,320 acres in 1926, and to 71,566 acres in 1934. Growers were generally under contract to their nearest factory and, at only 7 miles distance, Grasby was ideally placed to supply Brigg (25 miles was seen as the maximum distance for which it was economical to transport beet at the time).

One of the benefits of sugar beet for mixed and arable farming was that established rotations could be maintained. Beet was seen as the saviour of the root break in arable rotations. In some light-land areas beet was the

third most important crop after wheat and barley. As well as its value as a cash crop, it could be fed to stock. The common practice was to leave beet tops to be fed off by sheep and beet pulp could be fed to cattle, taking the place of turnips.

The farmers of Grasby appear to have switched to sugar beet and not to potatoes during this period. In 1941 20% of the arable land was taken up by beet as against only 2.5% by potatoes. Turnips and swedes occupied 11% of the arable land, clearly now very much secondary in importance to beet as the root crop in the rotations.

Government intervention was an important factor during the 1930s. The Wheat Act of 1932, which guaranteed a “*standard price of 10s per cwt*” boosted production in Lindsey by 28,000 acres, although in most cases wheat simply replaced barley and oats. Free trade was abandoned and marketing boards were introduced for milk, potatoes and pigs by the Agricultural Marketing Acts of 1931 and 1933.

Mechanization increased steadily, particularly the use of tractors, and the number of horses kept for agriculture in Lincolnshire fell from 51,736 in 1925 to 39,843 in 1935 and to 36,454 by 1940.