Four Centuries of Leicestershire Farming

By G. E. Fussell

With all the aplomb that made our forefathers drag in a military parallel, old Fuller of The Worthies of England remarked that the scouts of Charles, Duke of Burgundy, who mistook a field full of high thistles for the army of the King of France with their lances held upright, might have been pardoned for the like mistake about the plenteous beans of Leicestershire where, especially about Barton-in-the-Beans, they looked like a forest at harvest. He emphasises the county's prolificacy in this pulse by a reference to the nickname 'Bean-belly Leicestershire', and to the neighbouring men's quip, 'Shake a Leicestershire yeoman by the collar, and you shall hear the beans rattle in his belly', which the Leicester men answered by rattling the silver in their pockets.

Fuller divides the county into four quarters: the south-west, rich soil, plentiful in corn and pasture, but wanting wood so that the people there were forced to burn straw and cow shern, a waste of fertilising material that was criticised for the next 150 years: the north-west, mainly hard and barren, and difficult to work agriculturally, but with plenty of wood and coal: the whole of the east, good soil apt to bear corn and grass, and with sufficient fuel.

A century and a half before Fuller wrote, Leland travelled here and there through the county and made various comments upon what he saw. His generalisation was that the South and East was champaign or open field country, and the North and West very wooded, not so vastly different from Fuller. In detail 'by twixt Dene and Staunton is plentifull of corne and exceeding faire and large Medowes on both sides of the Welland. But from Rockingham to Staunton there was in sight little Wodde as yn a Countrey all Champaign. From Staunton to Leycester al by Champaine Grounde an 8 or 9 miles...Leicester to Brodegate by Grounde welle Woodid 3 miles...Brodegate to Groby a mile and a half much by Wooden lande...Brodegate to Leighborow about a V miles. 1st foreste of Charley commonly called the Wast XX Miles or more in Cumpace having plenty of woode...Forest of Leycester 5 miles long...Brodegate to Bellegrave Village a 4 miles by Woody and Pasture ground... Thens to Wiscombe a 4 miles by Corne, Pasture and Wood...faire Orchardes and Gardens'.

1Itinerary 1536 fol. 15, 19, 20, 22.
The champion part of Leicestershire was under the three field system from an early time, but there were certain peculiarities about the lay out of some of these fields, if the cast iron system of farming three open fields, that has been commonly accepted for so long, is historically correct. In another place I have shown that it was possible to grow a catch crop on strips of arable scattered about an open field in Berkshire, and that it was possible for a farmer to resow strips planted to autumn wheat with barley in the spring. In the open fields of Lutterworth there were distributed in 1608 several parcels of meadow or 'leys' among the arable fields. The tenants' strips of meadow, instead of being segregated near a stream, were dispersed here and there throughout the arable area just as they were in the neighbouring county of Northampton at Welford, and this arrangement, whereby part of the strips of an open field were cultivated as arable and part left as meadow or ley, was not apparently unusual in early Stuart days.

Nevertheless these fields seem to have been cultivated on the wheat and bean system that continued to be normal on heavy land for centuries. This is confirmed by a careful examination of inventories attached to the wills of Leicestershire farmers who died in the 16th century, which provide more detailed information about farming in this county than we possess for any other at that date. The wheat and bean system does not, it must be understood, mean that the rotation was limited to these crops on any particular piece of land. Indeed from the crops sown on the examples given it is a little difficult to see how exactly the land was cropped. On Copeland's Queniborough farm there were 6a. wheat and rye, 10a. peas and 8a. of barley, but these amount to 6a. winter sown and 18a. spring sown crop, so, if there was a fallow field containing 12a. of Copeland's holding, as Hoskins suggests, some spring corn must have been sown on strips in the same field as the wheat and rye, always provided, of course, that Copeland's holding was in fact divided fairly equally between three open fields. No very great exception could be taken to a rotation of wheat, peas, barley, fallow, and as the wheat and rye area was always smaller than the total of the other two crops, this would not be impossible to arrange on strips scattered over three fields, especially when those three fields may have had pieces of meadow or 'ley' in them that were not subject to the ordinary cultivations, so providing an excuse for doing something

---

a little unusual on the arable strips. The same difficulty arises on 
Rothley of Syston’s farm where the three standard crops 
were 6a. each of wheat and rye combined, 10a. peas and 8a. of 
barley. Not to labour the point, Tanner of Long Whatton had 1½a. 
of wheat, 6a. peas and 3a. of barley and Robert Curzon 3a. wheat, 
2½a. peas and 2½a. barley. On the two larger farms that follow 
much the same obtained. It is noticeable that only 1½a. oats are 
mentioned in these inventories which relate to the two decades be­
tween 1511 and 1531. Oxen were used for ploughing and haulage 
except on the larger farms where horses were generally employed, 
and each of the farmers owned some of each class of livestock, 
cattle, sheep and pigs, the number varying with the size of the 
holding and the economic position of the farmer.

The preponderance of spring sown crops continued throughout 
the century but by 1558 most of the fourteen inventories examined 
show a quantity of oats ranging from 1 to 7a. and this may perhaps 
(if the guess is not too hazardous) show that slowly farmers were 
beginning to employ horses where they had previously employed 
oxen and grew some oats to feed them. Hoskins advances this theory 
only to demolish it again by adding the evidence of inventories of 
1588 when both oats and rye appeared to be less important, but I 
incline to believe it. These are questions to which no answer can 
yet be given.

Similarly Hoskins examined the livestock possessions of the 
farmers, and his tables show that the ordinary farmer could only 
keep that number of animals, cattle, sheep or pigs for which he could 
find feed on his own pastures and on the commons appurtenant to 
the farm. Most of the great enclosures for sheep breeding that he 
mentions were all south of the road from Stamford to Leicester and 
Leicester to Fenny Drayton. This is confirmed by the purchases 
made by the numerous yeomen who bought sheep at some of the 
Leicestershire markets between 1612 and 1624. The largest purchases 
were from 100 to 200 sheep and lambs at a time, but most often 
the numbers bought at one market were from 4 or 5 to 20 or 30 
animals apiece.5

At the end of the 16th century the county was reckoned open 
despite the complaints about enclosure there, the south and east 
being largely champion still, although Gonner thinks that the pro­
duction of cattle beyond the Wreak suggests enclosure in the north­
west. During the 17th century enclosure continued. Leicester 
was prominent in the list of compositions and in 1678 the need arose

5Mildred Campbell. The English Yeomen, 1942, p. 204.
for bringing up people for hedge-breaking. Much of the south-east still remained open at the end of the 17th century. Gonner suggests that the north-west was enclosed direct from the forest and the waste, making new cultivated land.  

The effect of enclosure does not, however, seem to have been to change the agricultural output to an extent that could be remarked by contemporary topographers, of whom seven published works about England which contained some remarks that tend towards economic geography. A summary of these seven writers' remarks about Leicester is:—

1610. East many sheep, cattle.
1611. Corn, cattle, coal.
1659. Peas and beans, corn and sheep.
1673. Grain, peas and beans, cattle and sheep in south-east; cattle in north.
1678. Peas, beans, cattle, wool, coal.
1691. Corn, peas, beans, cattle and sheep.
1704. Corn, cattle, sheep; south-west peas and beans.

William Burton confirms the main divisions of the county. 'As touching the soyle', he wrote in 1622, 'I shall make this division: The South East side of the Shire is exceeding rich ground, yeelding great encrease of Corne in abundance of all kindes, and affoordeth many good and large Sheepe Pastures, breeding a sheepe to that height and goodnesse, so that (as I have credibly heard) neither Leinster nor Cotswould can exceed them, if one respect either largenesse of the body, finenesse of the wooll, or goodnesse of the breed. It is almost all champain and yeeldeth great delight and profit every way, and therin may compare with any Shire adjacent. But heere is the one only maime it hath, the want of wood and fuel for fire; for which the inhabitants are constrained either to travell farre to fetch it, or else to make use of those small helpes which they have; such as straw, cowsherne and such like. The Northwest side is

almost opposite to this; for the grounde is for the most part hard and barren, and in some places rocky and stony, yeelding fruite not without great labour and expences, having in some places neare unto the vast and decayed Forest of Charnwood, store of Limestone, wherewith they do husband their grounds; yet here they have good store of wood and Pitcoale at Cole Orton, and other places neere adioyning. Yet some parts of this side, are of a very good and fertile soyle, as those which lie upon the tracts and vallies of the Rivers Trent and Sore at the confluence of these two Rivers. The North-east and Southwest parts are much like, both good soile and apt to beare Corne and grasse and having better store of fuell; yet of the two the Southwest is the better furnished: In the Northeast side is that rich Vale of Belvoir or Bever, which extendeth itself into Nottinghamshire and some part of Lincolnshire, which for goodnesse and deepnesse of soile, is accounted inferior to none neere adioyning; yet by reason of the low situation, it is some time endamaged with raine, moisture and humid weather...

A rhyme old even then ran:—

'If Bever have a Cappe,
You Churles of the Vale look to that'.

Leicestershire farmers were not specially backward judged by the average of the time. The town of Leicester itself had three open fields, St. Margaret, St. Mary, and the West Field, but by the 17th century some parts of these fields had been enclosed and consequently there was less land for grazing when one of these was fallow. This naturally led to trouble between the commoners in general and those who held the enclosed land. 'In 1604, when the leases of the Grange lands fell in, it was resolved that no new leases should be granted until the cow pasture had been enlarged... There were difficulties with regard to rights of common in the South Field in 1624...’ with the result that it was decreed that ‘all such leyes and other greensward ground which hath beene plowed upp within the South fields at any time within xvij yeares last past, shall be layd to grasse again’. The meadow was also divided with mathematical precision. The farmers of the Grange lands were restricted to two cows and 30 sheep on the grazing land for every yardland they occupied, and the sheep were not to be allowed on the corn landland or corn stubble till after the cattle had been on for nine days. The swine also were to be kept off for some time. Freemen of the town were only allowed to graze two cows and four swine.

These regulations show two things; one, that it was not always in the 16th century and before that grazing lands were plentiful, but in some villages there was in fact a shortage; and, two, that
pieces of open field land were sometimes left to grass to meet
this shortage, a proceeding which was a proof of certain elasticity
in the system. This idea is confirmed by a Terrier attached to a
feoffment of the town lands of Market Harborough dated 17th April,
1655. There was here an acre 'hade' i.e., grassland, lying in
Jenkinson's plough land. There was both arable and grass land in
Gallow Field, and arable and grass and meadow all in the East
Field, as well as in the South, West and Nether Fields. Of course
it may be said that the open field system had gone far towards
abolition as there were so many fields, but only a contemporary map
could prove that, one way or the other.

Charnwood Forest was grazed in common by a number of
manors and there is a good deal of evidence of sporadic settlement
both by legal and illegal squatters. One cottage built on the waste
had first only had four acres attached to it, but the occupier had
enclosed another two acres in 1604. This was not the only one
mentioned in contemporary documents, and a legal one was built
for the smith (what smith). There was also a 'sory cote' put up
by a wisket (basket) maker which paid no rent or fine.

The commoners complained that the number of beasts each put
in was not regulated, and that young men who would have been
better occupied spent their lives looking after the cattle. One of
27 years of age had done nothing else. Part of the demesne had
also been split and let as separate holdings, a reduction of the
common grazing that was much resented. Two marlpits are men-
tioned by Mr. George F. Farnham, the writer of the history of the
Forest, and these, if they had not fallen into disuse, show that the
value of this material as a fertiliser was appreciated.

The county probably did not get at that time a very high return
for its farming efforts. The average, perhaps rather more
than the average, has been enshrined in a quatrain by Herrick:—

'Lord, 'tis thy plenty dropping hand
That soils my land,
And gives me for my bushel sown
Twice ten for one'.

The best corn in Europe according to Gabriel Plattes, writing
in the fourth decade of the 17th century, was the Vale of Belvoir,
but it is not about the arable of the county that the didactic writers,
whose numbers and accuracy were increasing, remark. At about
the same date Gervase Markham, whose forebears were probably
Nottinghamshire squires, remarked that all over the Midlands there
was 'a large boned Sheep, of the best shape and the deepest staple'.
This was the pasture sheep, bred on the common wastes or in the
new pasture enclosures of parts of Warwick and Worcester, all
Leicester, Bucks. and part of Northampton and Nottingham except
Sherwood Forest, a statement repeated verbatim by Richard Blome
in 1686, and they sold well to the London butchers to the 'no small
Profit of the Grazier'. And he thought the best pigs were raised in
Leicestershire and the clay counties on its borders, as well as in
some parts of Northampton. They were part of the produce of the
vast store of beans and peas grown there, and seem to have flourished
on that diet, although such diet was inclined to make the fat too
soft and subject to waste.

At the end of the 17th century, in those 'degenerate days and
Dregs of Time and the very Rust of an Iron-Age', the graziers of
Northampton and Leicester were in the habit of selling off their
sheep, if they showed signs of liver-rot, at an early stage of the disease
to the London market 'and then our Citizens and dainty Dames do
make good cheer with this stately and (no doubt) very tender
Mutton'; but although there is this occasional mention in the 17th
century farming textbooks of the valuable sheep and cattle and
fat pigs produced in Leicestershire, none of them mentions the
horses bred there. Philip Kynder, however, did notice this activity
in 1663 remarking that the yeomen of Leicester bred good horses
and that their grass was as sweet as a salad and knee deep. This
activity must have been well established because in Cam­
den's day there was a frequented horse-fair at Rothwell, midway
between Pytchley and Market Harborough: there was also a great
cattle fair at the last town. Leicester itself had a horse-fair as
Horsefair Street shows.

None of these are more than disjointed remarks that may provide
hints of how Leicestershire men did their farming in the 16th and
17th centuries, but Edward Lisle, who lived at Crux-Easton in
Hampshire from about the 1690's to 1722 was remarkably interested
in agriculture and the methods of different men. He had relations
in Leicester and made a good few notes on what different people
told him, in case he might be able to improve his own farming in
Hampshire by adopting some of their methods.

Already then some Leicestershire men were trying to improve
their longhorn cattle by importing the larger beasts from Lancashire
but so far had failed to effect the increase in size they aimed at.

8The Gentlemen's Recreation, p. 259.
9Philotheos Physiologus. The Countryman's Companion, 1700, p. 51.
10The historie of Darby-shire, c. 1663. Reliquary xxiii, p. 119.
11Ed. H. C. Darby. An Historical Geog. of England before 1800, 1936,
p. 367.
Capt. Tate of ... near Loughborough told Lisle that the Leicester land was richer than Lancashire but if Lancashire cows were brought in they fell back to Leicester types in the third generation. A Mr. Clerk of Ditchley (? Dishley) added that the Leicester dairymen were not so choice in breeding as those of Lancashire, where the calves were weaned on unskimmed milk to make them grow big; in Leicester they only got skimmed milk and whey. It paid the Leicester men better to breed coach horses and mares and to fat cattle; they only kept small dairies and apparently did not worry very much about them. Clerk himself gave ground oats or barley, if corn was cheap, to his bulls or old beasts, when they got pretty well on in flesh, to finish them off, and found this paid well. The fat beasts walked to London to their destined end.

I imagine that some colts were bred in the county but Lisle’s note is that colts were bought at 2 years old, worked gently in the plough, given full work at 3, and sold at 4 as coach horses. The system must have been for the arable farmers who did not breed horses themselves, and my general impression is that such farmers kept mares for brood and work conjointly when they could, and did not buy from breeders. This is confirmed because Hertfordshire men bought Leicestershire colts, bred them in the same way, and sold them when about 6 ‘to Gentlemen at London for their Coaches’. The work of these horses paid for itself and made them ‘increase their stature’, so they sold readily and made a double advantage to the farmer. The colts and horses were fed on pease straw, a very hearty food, and a warning was issued against feeding chaff and oats together because the animals were apt to swallow oats whole. The Loughborough carrier to London gave his beasts oat hulls and beans in equal parts while at Loughborough, but fed them rather differently on their travels and in London. Mr. Clerk of Ditchley thought the large breed of Leicester horses degenerated when bred in Yorkshire (is this a criticism of the Cleveland Bay?) and that the Yorkshire pad and saddle horses became fleshy and heavy limbed when brought to Leicester.

Capt. Tate, a forerunner of Bakewell, proposed to buy a Lincolnshire tup to improve his flock, but was warned by Major Hartopp and Mr. Clerk that he must have a care to buy a small one or his ewes, if not very large, might die in yeaning. The Lin-

14 Lisle, pp. 351 and 275.
colnshire sheep at this time was a tall brute, with a naked belly and legs which conditions in the Fens had produced, and it might not have introduced any improved element, other than perhaps unwanted size, into the Leicestershire breed.

Leicestershire had a special type of plough of its own but none of the early writers say more than that: they say the same thing about other counties and are sometimes rather more explicit. By 1700 Leicestershire smiths were using Danish iron in all plough tackle and horseshoes, except coulters and plough shares, because it was just as cheap as English and not so brittle. Presumably there was a harrow in use but what it was is not known: but it is likely that bush harrows were used and perhaps a heavier type of wood with iron teeth. By inference a plain roller was another piece of normal equipment.

The arable farming varied between the open fields and enclosures, and in the latter there was a kind of convertible husbandry, four corn crops, three of barley and one of wheat being taken, seeds being planted in the wheat field in the spring. The grass was left down for several years, an indication of the importance of grazing. In the common fields 5 tilts (ploughings) were given for barley, 4 for wheat, 5 for oats, and only 1 for peas and beans, and the fallow ploughing was often done too deep, so that the weeds germinated, whereas a shallower ploughing would have killed them off. The common field farmers winter-fed their wheat, presumably with sheep, by general consent, but not their rye because the plant was too tender and would be killed out. Some wheat seed was steeped in lime. Winter folding was impossible between Michaelmas and May because the land was so wet and would poach and kill the sheep, so it was necessary to dung the barley; wheat followed, sown under furrow; peas and beans, and then summer fallow again. Heavy dressings of pigeon dung were given to the corn (wheat) after the seed was sown and the dung harrowed in. This was done by Mr. Putchings [sic] and Sir Ambrose Phillips, and the latter sold the material at 4d. a bushel. Soot was used as a top dressing for wheat in February ‘so that the land is black with it’, and Thomson of Loughborough used malt dust on cold wet grass grounds at 4 qrs. per acre. Clerk also used kiln dust on grass or barley in January or February and sold the largest tail


17Lisle, p. 36.
dust at 4d. a bushel to feed pigs. Lime was freely used on wheat and barley land and by Chestlin, Clerk and Bowly on grassland. It cost 1/- a bushel.\textsuperscript{18}

This is a fairly comprehensible description of Leicestershire farming at the end of the 17th century, and although there is little or nothing in the way of evidence between the last of Hoskins’ inventories and Lisle’s disjointed remarks, if those remarks are applied to the information which has emerged from those inventories, it will be seen to apply not only to Leicestershire farming at 1700 but also in a large measure to the farming of the 16th century; and it may therefore be assumed that the systems were so far traditional, although the ability of open field farmers to allow the winter feeding of the wheat field by common consent shows that they could make arrangements to alter the usual tenor of their ways.

Two things remain to be said about this time. One, Pawlet, ‘who deals in great quantities of turnips’, sowed about 1½ lb. seed per acre, and Chestlin of Loughborough had been very successful with the crop. These people distinguished four sorts by colour, white, blue, red and yellow. Again Mr. Herrick did not think broad clover would do for a ley on rich Leicestershire land. He had learned from experience that when the clover decayed it prevented the land from swarding to natural grass.\textsuperscript{19} These are, of course, only isolated remarks but they indicate that already some Leicestershire farmers had adopted the new root and grass crops with varying success.

Just after Lisle died Defoe produced his \textit{Tour}. He found that the whole county was ‘taken up in country business... particularly in breeding and feeding cattle; the largest sheep and horses in England are found here... even most of the gentlemen are graziers, and in some places the graziers are so rich that they grow gentlemen’, renting farms from £500 to £2,000 a year rent—probably an exaggeration. The sheep had the most flesh and the heaviest fleeces of any in England, and the great black coach horses produced for the London coaches and draymen were exceeding numerous and very large and strong.\textsuperscript{20}

With the exception of casual and unrelated remarks in the various farming textbooks, comments very similar to those of the 17th century in the 18th century topographers, and occasional

\textsuperscript{18}Lisle, \textit{passim}.
\textsuperscript{19}Lisle, pp. 233, 235, 247.
notes by the growing number of tourists, there is nothing further of a general nature about Leicestershire farming until Arthur Young visited the county in 1770. Like Defoe, Young found the principal part of the county was grazing farms but he did not estimate them as so large, their rentals being £100 to £900, while in the remaining open fields the holdings were small—only £50 to £80 a year or 100 to 160 acres. The open field arable continued to be cropped in the traditional way; fallow, barley or wheat, beans, but in the enclosures turnips were cultivated, not always to the best advantage. Some farmers carted off the roots to be fed on the pastures, and then took barley and wheat or oats before sowing more turnips. A better course was turnips; barley; clover 2 years; wheat, a rotation that was vastly approved of later on in Northumberland and the Lowlands, and in Lincolnshire, as the five course rotation, but Young could not foresee that. Less ploughing was done on the fallow of enclosed land than in the open fields. Seed sown and yields averaged:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seed</th>
<th>Yield</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wheat</td>
<td>2 bus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barley</td>
<td>4 bus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oats</td>
<td>7 bus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beans</td>
<td>5 bus.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The clover was mown for hay but if Dutch white was sown it was always fed off with sheep and expected to fatten from four to seven large sheep. Grass was broken up by paring and burning and the ashes proved a successful fertiliser for turnips. Lime was freely used and mellowed the rich clay soil. By draining and the use of pigeon’s dung all the rushes were killed out. The draining was done with blackthorns on to a fill at the bottom of a refilled trench and this was known as hollow draining.

Young was highly critical of the system of cow-keeping. The cows were all Long-horns and gave 3 gallons a day or £5 a season, but their winter feed was hay, given in the field, which Young indignantly called vile. He thought Leicestershire graziers foolish not to grow cabbages because they were often forced to buy turnips from ‘near an hundred miles off’ for winter keep. Lancashire cows were bought in April at 3, 4 or 5 years old to fatten and kept in enclosures till November, fatting wethers being kept on the same pasture and 100 good acres were estimated to fatten 50 cows and 120 sheep. Flocks kept by open field farmers numbered from 40 to 120; those kept in enclosures rose to vast numbers. Young preferred the Leicester sheep to the Lincolnshire.
Fat pigs were bought up to 12 to 24 score. Implements were waggon, carts, ploughs, harrows and rollers. Young’s route through the county was through Harborough to Quenby Hall, to Tilton-on-the-Hill, to Leicester, to Loughborough, and so to Dishley21 where Bakewell had already made himself famous; and of course Young was naturally extremely enthusiastic about his work. Bakewell, has, however, been so frequently discussed that the barest outline of what he did should suffice here.

Bakewell, though he worked on the Long-horn, a breed now almost extinct in this country, was working on material to hand, and by importing material from Lancashire was following a well-established custom. But he was a man of vision: not only, as Scott Watson has said, did he conceive an entirely new type of animal, but he devised a new system of breeding. He foresaw the increasing demand for meat from the growing urban populations and proceeded to produce a beef steer in place of a draught ox. And he did the same thing with the Leicester sheep. His New Leicesters, the foundation of a new breed in itself, and a breed that has provided crosses with a majority of other breeds, was a mutton animal whose forerunners had been primarily wool producers, and the New Leicester carried an improved fleece. The sheep were successful in a lasting way; the improved Long-horn cattle gave place to the Short-horn and to other improved breeds, but the Bakewell lesson was learned by those who used his methods to produce cattle that took pride of place from his breed.22

Young was perhaps not so accurate an observer as William Marshall who lived at Statfold from March, 1784 to April, 1786, whereas, at least in 1770, Young made only a cursory and passing inspection of the county. This opinion is confirmed because the 5-course system Young describes, though it was possibly practised here and there, is very different from what Lisle says was general in 1700 and what Marshall says was general when he lived in the neighbourhood. The system of cropping he found there was a great surprise to Marshall, and it was substantially what Lisle had known, but whose origin Marshall found himself unable to trace. It was the convertible husbandry of the Leicester enclosures, where the grass was broken up by a single ploughing for oats; the oat stubble

ploughed two or three times for wheat; the wheat stubble winter-fallowed for barley and grass-seeds letting the land lie for six or seven years in herbage—just such a system as was practised in the south-western counties of Devon and Cornwall and in some other ‘grazing’ counties. Something new was that men, who thought the land could not be kept sufficiently clean under this system, introduced a cleaning crop of turnips between the wheat and the barley, although already turnips were losing their popularity on the strong land.

Marshall found the Leicestershire waggon chiefly noticeable for its awkwardness, clumsiness, unwieldiness and general unfitness for a farmer’s use. The Gloucestershire waggon would have been a boon to the Leicestershire farmers; but the old heavy plough similar to the Gloucestershire implement had been superseded by the then up-to-date Rotherham plough with a circular coulter drawn by three horses, and a still more modern invention, the double furrow plough, had made the most rapid progress towards common use, after being introduced from Worcestershire about twenty years previously by a local man. It had been developed by Bush of Hurley and he was still in 1786 the leading maker. It was a wheel plough and did not require a lad to lead, a principle then lately extended to the single plough. A peculiarity of the local harrow, which was very large and heavy, was that it was hung behind a pair of wheels and provided with shafts. It also had a ‘Running bull’ a strip of iron along which the hitching ring had free play so that it was not strained when the team turned. Marshall does not mention the roller which was probably too commonplace to remark, nor does he comment upon the use of any manures other than dung, lime and marl.

The ordinary crops naturally continued to be cultivated, and Marshall mentions also vetches, potatoes and clover, the last taking the place of beans in several of the remaining common fields. He writes as if potatoes were by no means a new crop in the county, the old varieties used having been badly affected by curled top. They were almost invariably planted in newly broken-up grassland. This crop was hoed once or twice while growing, forked up by hand and stored in camps (modern: clamps). He thought poorly of the acreage and cultivation of the turnip crop and considered that the soil was more suited to cabbage, and, although he had seen a few small patches here and there, the graziers were still not wise enough to grow them in any quantity, except Mr. Paget of Ibstock who had grown 10, 12 and 14 acres a year for many years past. The long leys were sown with red clover under barley, some farmers adding
a few pounds of white clover and some clean ray grass. The first
and sometimes the second season the ley was mown, and then
grazed for the rest of the term.

It was, of course, quite impossible for Marshall to avoid dis-
cussing the Bakewell livestock improvement work, and it over-
shadows all of his ideas about the animals kept in the county: but
he criticised these valuable Longhorns as poorish dairy stock though
they ranked high for grazing, which was after all the purpose for
which they had been bred. Nevertheless Leicester was already
famous for Stilton cheese which had been developed early in the
18th century on the pastures of the eastern uplands. Grazing cattle
were brought in from all over the country by the ordinary farmers,
Scotch, Welsh and Irish steers being no strangers on the Leicesters-
shire fields.

The contrast between the ‘old Leicester’ sheep in which Mr.
Frisby of Waltham near Melton Mowbray took the lead, and the
‘new Leicester’ developed by Bakewell, is inevitably remarked, but
Marshall hints that its earliest spring was by the efforts of Joseph
Allom of Clifton. Allom, ‘who had raised himself by dint of industry,
from a ploughboy, seems to be acknowledged on all hands, as the
first who distinguished himself, in the Midland district, for a superior
breed of sheep’. He bought his breeding stock from Mr. Stone of
Goadby Marwood, and he was a fashionable man to buy a ram from
at a price of two or three guineas, indeed the only such man in the
county, previously to Bakewell.

As to pigs they were very numerous, as they had always been,
the farms of some then modern farmers being mere hog warrens,
and, of course, even in his pigs Bakewell possessed a superior breed.
They were mainly fattened on barley meal, sometimes with an ad-
mixture of potatoes, very few beans and peas being used by the
1780’s.

The black cart-horse, for the breeding of which Leicester
continued to be justly renowned, had been greatly improved during
the previous 30 years, clean legs, a short thick carcase and a shorter
fore-end making it a still more useful animal.23

By the time Marshall was writing, the enclosure of Leicester
was practically complete. Monk, who wrote the draft General
View of the Agriculture of the County of Leicester in 1794, knew
then of only 10 open field parishes and two half open and half
enclosed, and the tithe documents of the 1840’s show no surviving
open field.

23William Marshall, The Rural Economy of the Midland Counties, 1790,
Vol. I, passim.
Slater thinks that the 18th-century enclosures in Leicestershire resulted in a good deal of arable land being laid down to pasture, and bases this conclusion on Eden, and Arthur Young’s *Political Arithmetic, 1774*. This may be true of the heavy wet land which Young describes as more suitable for grazing, as indeed it was. About half the rural area was enclosed by Act before 1801, estimated by Slater at not quite 190,000 acres, the modern area under crops and grass having been some 445,000 acres in 1939; but the evidence is a trifle inconclusive as may be anticipated from the general nature of the observations made. Out of the 133 Acts passed for Leicestershire in the 18th century, Slater estimates that the wheat acreage increased by 453 acres in the area covered by 11 Acts and decreased by 4,340 acres in the area covered by 63 Acts. Since these 63 Acts are about half the total, and the wheat acreage affected was less than 5,000 acres, the area of land laid down to grass may have seemed more important to the people immediately affected, naturally enough, than it was in the total economy of the country.\(^{24}\)

The revised *General View*, prepared by William Pitt of Wolverhampton, was published in 1809, after a decade and a half of war, and one would expect an intensification of the established principles of farming in the county to have been the result of those conditions. The work at Dishley must needs be mentioned again, an important point being the use of Cooke’s drill for sowing. Mr. Astley, a famous breeder of cattle, sheep and pigs, had been remarked by Marshall. The Earl of Moira was working a home farm at Donington Park of 370a., of which 70 were permanent grass, 35 meadows on the Trent, 100a. of crops on the wheat, barley, oats, beans course, which sounds no different or better than the traditional practice, a few acres of oddments and 35a. of green crops, the balance under clover. Bakewell, with both foresight and traditional lore, believed in the alternation of crops and grass, on what would now, perhaps, be called the ley-system. Mr. Watkinson of Woodhouse, not far from Loughborough, had about three quarters of his land in grass and the rest under crops. He was wise enough to disapprove of two white crops in succession. He used Cooke’s seed drill. He grew swedes, cabbages, turnips, potatoes and stubble cole and was a reputable breeder of Dishley sheep and Longhorn cattle. Mr. Stone of Barrow had a sheep farm of 200a.. He also cultivated similar forage crops, and used a root cutter made by Hanfords. He was currently using oxen for draught but intended to change to

horses. These were the men who led the way, but merit in sheep breeding and improvement of grassland were widely dispersed through the county. The dairy produced excellent cheese. No particular change in the course of cropping the arable land had taken place, but it would seem that the new forage crops were spreading over a wider area as the farmers became more alive to their value.

One thing deserves particular mention. A factory for the manufacture of farm implements of husbandry ‘respectfully submitted to Noblemen, Gentlemen and farmers in every part of the Kingdom’ had been established at Hathern, near Loughborough, by Joseph Hanford and William Davenport, ploughwrights. They made three types of ordinary plough, two trenching ploughs, a horse hoe plough for earthing up cabbages, potatoes, etc., four types of harrows, and various scufflers, rakes and carts. 25 Again Elkington’s system of drainage had been introduced into the county from Warwick.

When the French wars ended the market broke and a great depression fell upon the farming industry. Starvation prices no longer ruled, and everywhere there were failures and bankruptcies. Government was forced to call enquiry after enquiry into the state of distress ruling in agriculture, but nothing emerged from these enquiries except a mass of printed matter that describes the methods of farming practised in those parts of the country from which squires, great farmers, land agents and others journeyed up to London to give evidence. No practical method of dealing with the distress was discovered, and farming recovered by the efforts of the industry itself and by the recovery of trade and its expansion. Leicestershire does not figure so prominently as some other counties in all this evidence, not, I think, because there were not great landowners there and well-known farmers, but perhaps because on the whole the grazing counties did not suffer so badly as those whose dependence was mainly upon tillage.

J. C. Loudon, that industrious Scot, did no more than summarize Pitt’s General View when he wanted to provide a description of Leicestershire farming in 1825, and this may be evidence that Leicestershire men continued on the even tenor of their way, or that Loudon had not the means of making a personal survey himself. 26

25 William Pitt, General View of...Leicester, 1808.
26 Encyclopædia of Agriculture, 1825, 2nd Ed. 1831, p. 1150 ff.
Cobbett was in the county in the spring of 1830, riding in from Newark to Melton Mowbray where ‘the beautiful pastures of this little verdant county of Leicester began to appear. Meadows and green fields with here and there a cornfield...very pretty, all the country around being so rich...amongst the Leicestershire sheep, those fat creatures we see the butchers’ boys battering about so unmercifully in the streets and outskirts of the Wen’. He did not think so highly of the situation of the labourer. 27

This was all very well for Cobbett, but it is doubtful if it was all very well for the graziers and farmers to a much greater degree than it was for the labourers. In 1836 the tradesmen were complaining of the farmers’ economies, and some farmers had been reduced to labourers by the lean years. On the smaller farms of the clay land the occupiers had always been men of insufficient capital and suffered accordingly in times of depression.

John Ellis of Beaumont Leys, near Leicester, was farming his 150 acres arable on a 6-course rotation in 1836, and he occupied 250 acres grass as well. He was a breeder and a dairyman and sent liquid milk to Leicester, where, owing to a proportionate increase in the population, the demand for this commodity had almost doubled in the previous 25 years, the time during which he had been farming in the county. He got stable manure from the town, as did others. Some people had evidently said that the increase in the local potato crop had reduced the demand for wheat, but Ellis did not think this crop had expanded more than in proportion to the population. He learnt straw draining when his father sent him to Essex as a boy, and said that Leicester farmers had done a deal of draining with straw, stones, tiles and turf. In one thing he was mistaken. Lime, he said, was a new thing in Leicester; it had been brought in by the new railway, the cost of transport being a practical problem before this. A good season had helped. In 1835 wheat had yielded 36/38 bu.; barley 50/51; potatoes 200 bu. of 90 lb. in 1835, 300/350 bu. in 1834, and though the rot in the sheep had been very bad, the loss had been made up.

A good deal of land in the county that had been used to grow wheat could do so no more, especially the old worn-out clay land. Twenty-five years before, the light land had not been expected to grow wheat but experience had shown that barley and turnip land would grow more wheat than the old wheat and bean land. Ellis did not believe that cake feeding would pay in Leicester conditions where the beasts could not be overwintered but must be bought in spring and sold in autumn. 28

28Evidence to Select Committee of the House of Commons on Agriculture, 1836.
Practically the whole of Leicester at that date was engaged in the purchase of stores and finishing for the London market. Although the graziers had not been so hard hit by the post-war depression as arable farmers, many were said to have sold fat stock at hardly any advance on the cost of their stores. The early part of 1836 had seen a slight rise in price but that was of little service, because most of the fat stock, both cattle and sheep, had then been sold off. The rise was due to a fortuitous circumstance. The turnip crop had failed in Norfolk and Suffolk, and those counties had been unable to finish off their stock ready for market. Feeding in those counties were greatly reduced, to only one beast where ten were fed before, probably an exaggeration; what were fed had to get artificial food or wheat.

In these circumstances the Leicestershire farmers naturally demanded rent reductions, and usually got ten per cent., although Leicestershire rents had not been raised at the time of high prices during the war. Despite this many farmers had failed, not because of any lack of prudence and foresight on their own part, but because they had been quite unable to cope with the conditions of the day.

These conditions, particularly the undue weight of the poor rate, were indignantly described by Henry William Wilson of Allestton in the same year.

The Census of 1831 showed, in Hinckley, 692 factory workers and 119 farm labourers. The acreage of the parish was 3,190, rated at £2,351, and the rates on houses only amounted to £1,411. Individuals paid very heavily. Mr. Bonner, a yeoman owner occupier of 70 acres, paid £108 15s. od. in 1835; others paid as much as and usually more than £1 an acre, and this is in a time of farming depression.

The statement about Wigston is worth quoting. 'Wigston contains 2,944 acres of good land, capable, under proper cultivation, of growing four quarters of wheat to an acre, four or five quarters of beans, and five and a half of oats; one acre and a half of grass would feed a good beast and would carry from five to seven ewes and followers; the rates upon land in 1832 were £2,692; upon houses £233; the number of manufacturing labourers, 301; of agricultural ditto, 69. This parish presents the monstrous anomaly of land of excellent quality being thrown out of cultivation because unequal to the demands made upon it for poor rates'. He quotes similar figures relating to the parish of Anstey.

Though confronted with difficulties, the farmers had been improving the land. After the outbreak of rot in 1830 landlords had encouraged their tenants to drain their land and a good deal of
this work had been done between 1833 and 1835 with a good effect, as Ellis said, but this improvement had generally been carried out at the expense of the landlord himself.

Another alternative had been to plough out some of the grass-land. This was not successful. All that happened, if it went so far as that, was that the tenant cashed in the accumulated fertility, paid his rent while he was doing it, and left the land in a worse position that before. Although this had been done with the consent of the landlords, who, equally with their tenants, were anxious to find a road away from ruin, it really only amounted to paying the rent at the landlord's expense, as Wilson rightly said. Fortunately perhaps, the relative prices of corn and meat had changed and there was in 1836 no further temptation to pursue this disastrous policy.\(^\text{29}\)

Things had been at their worst and were then beginning to recover. Shortly after, of course, began the renowned period of high farming. Even so George Kilby of Queniborough did not have a very high opinion of contemporary farming in his neighbourhood. He had a holding of 260 acres there in 1848, and believed that a proper system of tenant right compensation would lead to more rapid improvement. He had drained his own land and estimated that the work would last 200 years because he had done it so well with tiles on flat soles: but he was in a special situation, holding great confidence in his landlord. He was then occupying a farm that had been in his family from his great-grandfather's time some 120 or 130 years before—not precisely the same land because the parish had been enclosed in the interval, but the same property.

A great deal of drainage was necessary, especially the undrained grass in the east of the county. If done it would increase the produce of corn and the food of animals. A lot of grassland ought to be broken up, cropped and re-seeded but the landlords did not want this done. Some had been treated in this way at Pickwell and Leesthorpe, but very little at Queniborough. In spite of the hills it would be an advantage, even at Tilton, except on the steeper slopes. The Hon. Mr. Wilson tried to break up some hills but erosion set in and the experiment was unsuccessful. Not much oilcake was used in feeding, and the farm buildings were very bad indeed and quite inadequate to improved cultivation.\(^\text{30}\)

In the west of the county, a two-year ley was common at this time, the second year's grass being fairly heavily limed. The root break was turnips, swedes, rape; or cabbage; and the corn crops wheat, barley or oats suitably arranged, or beans, wheat, green

\(^{29}\)Evidence to \textit{Select Committee of the House of Lords on the State of Agriculture, 1836.}\n
\(^{30}\)Select Committee on Agricultural Customs, 1848. \textit{Evidence of George Kilby.}\n
crops, barley and seeds, grass. Dung and town manure were used and the new artificialis, bones, guano, superphosphate and nitrate of soda. The small landowners took no interest in drainage, and much of what had been done was either too shallow or too deep, and the upland grass needed more manuring than it got.

Stilton cheese was made in the north and east of the county and the cows by 1850 were either Longhorn or Shorthorn or a cross between them. In a good dairy a cow was reckoned to make an average of 4 cwt. of cheese in a year and to require for her keep summer and winter 3 acres of land. The dairy waste products of 4 cows would fatten a pig of 40 lb. to 12 score 'which is an increase of 50 lb. for each cow besides the cheese and the calf: and the pasture would also keep 2 ewes and lambs in summer and 2 wethers if supplemented with ½ acre green crop in the winter'.

The cows were usually kept until they fell off but some farmers sold them fat after 3 years milking for about £13. They were stall fed in winter and grazed in summer. The winter food varied but it was usual to give straw cut with a small quantity of hay saturated with linseed boiled in 15 times its volume of water and generally some bran or oatmeal in addition. When in milk the cows got mangold and meal and bran. They went on to Italian rye grass in early spring. The keeping was expensive but paid in high yields and the large quantity of rich manure produced.

The new Leicester sheep were common all over the county, which continued to produce good horses for the farm, the cart and the saddle.31

Great changes had taken place by sixteen years later. Then it could be said that the farming of the county was divided into three systems, i.e., grazing; breeding, rearing and grazing; dairying.

The grazing had taken on its modern aspect, and was practised on the richest land where an acre would graze and fatten a bullock to 50/60 Imperial stone and one sheep over 20 lb. a qr. in summer and 1—1½ sheep in winter. The dictum was 'although cattle do best on rather young grass, at least before Midsummer, yet bare pastures and rapid fattening are incompatible; on the other hand satisfactory grazing is rarely accomplished where the bite gets too long'. Extra cattle were bought to meet a flush of grass and cake to meet a deficiency, and the pastures were grazed quite bare once a year to clear up the rough coarse patches. Formerly these had been cut with scythe but in 1866 Welsh and Scotch runts 'gnawed them

The fields were grazed and mown for hay in alternate years. The stock was bought from March to May, the number being increased as the grass grew; they were sold off from July to November, the last being finished in stalls with cake. The sheep were bought in September and October and sold fat in May, June and July, being drafted weekly. Some lambs were sold as one shear; some as two. A few horses were bought as colts in autumn and sold in the following autumn.

The breeding farms grew straw and roots, the grass being only second-rate, and cake feeding was necessary if the complete business was carried out. One-third of one-half of the land was under arable and was cropped on a six-course rotation. Some of these farms only kept stores and sold them in autumn to Lincoln and Norfolk dealers.

The dairy district stretches from the centre of the breeding district to Melton Mowbray and so north. This was where the Stilton cheese continued to be made, but the cows were now mainly Short-horn. Similarly there was great dairy business in the west of the county where the tawny Tamworth pigs were fed on the waste.

Charnwood Forest had been enclosed in 1808 and the whole 18,000 acres allotted with the exception of 4/500 acres by 1829. After reclamation the land was worked on a six-course rotation. A great deal of land had been laid down in the previous half-century and the pastures greatly improved in the same time, but not so much improved as the arable if one opinion may be accepted. Bakewell’s Longhorns had gone by 1866, Shorthorns having displaced them and the new Leicester sheep were then giving place to a cross between a Lincoln ram and Leicester ewe, or in the west to a Shropshire Down ram. The Leicester black horse, so famous fifty years before was, it is said, almost extinct.

The tendency to laying down was accentuated by 1875 and the reasons for this development given by George Bass of Bagworth Park, Leicester, are very cogent. He occupied 515 acres of which 325 acres had been arable when he started laying down in 1871, between which date and 1874 he had done 125 acres. His plan had been to crop wheat, next turnips, then seeds under a corn nurse crop. He used lime and farmyard manure on the young seeds the second year and 4 or 5 cwt. of bone dust. About the fourth year the seeds were grazed. Mowing the first year gave the small seeds a better chance of establishing themselves. Bass found this better because farm workers were scarce in a colliery district, he kept 4 cart horses

---

the less, saved £150 a year on his labour bill, and kept 200 more sheep and 70-80 more beasts. He fed cake to the grazing animals. He found grassland paid far better for manuring than arable.\textsuperscript{34}

A few years later the Leicestershire pastures were the subject of an unrestrained encomium. 'Almost the whole of the middle and southern parts of the county consists of grassland, much of which, High Leicestershire, as it is called, is the magnificent pasture land upon which so many and such fine beasts are annually grazed. In the north-eastern part of the county, north of Melton Mowbray, rather more arable land is found, some of which on the borders of Lincolnshire, the heath, or 'creach' land as it is called...is adapted for growing barley and turnips and clover for sheep feeding. But in the Vale of Belvoir, in the extreme north-eastern part of the county, a good deal of dairy farming is carried on and...a considerable quantity of Stilton cheese is made. In the north-western part of the county mixed husbandry is pursued'.

The disastrous seasons in the 70's caused heavy losses in the county: the rot in sheep and the continuous rain had made the land so soaked and sodden that it was carrying one-third less stock and was one-third less valuable than it had been, and many of the old turf drains had been damaged.

The stock was greatly depleted and the existence of agricultural statistics defines the losses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1875</th>
<th>1880</th>
<th>1881</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farm horses</td>
<td>17,426</td>
<td>17,950</td>
<td>18,085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cattle</td>
<td>136,848</td>
<td>126,902</td>
<td>123,681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheep</td>
<td>453,477</td>
<td>357,737</td>
<td>263,383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pigs</td>
<td>25,685</td>
<td>21,596</td>
<td>21,765</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These figures speak for themselves. Only the horses had increased, cattle were down by 13,000; sheep by 190,000 and pigs by 4,000—which must have been disastrous indeed for a county which relied so much on livestock and livestock products.

Changes in the species of animals kept were still taking place. The county no longer jealously maintained only the black horse, but had a mixed lot. Shorthorn cattle were most commonly found and were the only cattle bred in the county; but Herefords, Irish, Scotch and Welsh were fed in large numbers and many of these were very fine specimens. The sheep were longwools, Leicesters or Lincolns, but the Shropshire Downs were increasing in number and there were a few cross-breds. The large white pig was the most usual but some Berkshires were kept.\textsuperscript{35} The Tamworth is not mentioned.

\textsuperscript{34} Morgan Evans and T. Bowstead, \textit{Report on laying down to permanent pasture}, Jour. R.A.S.E., 1875, p. 484.

This was the form of Leicestershire farming throughout the rest of Queen Victoria’s reign and up to the outbreak of war in 1914, except that with increasing transport facilities the trade in liquid milk increased, as it did in other grazing counties. It was, perhaps, this trade that made it possible to say in 1894 that no land was uncultivated in the county, and that farms could always be let even if it was sometimes necessary to take a reduced rent. Liquid milk was then sent to Leeds and Newcastle, but chiefly to London. The sale of milk was thought to have reduced the output of cheese slightly, as it may very well have because one cannot have both products from the same cow. Otherwise things had settled into a routine\(^{36}\) that was only to be disturbed by war and peace and war again.

---