

# George Boswell of Puddletown (1735–1815): progressive farmer and author

by Joseph Bettey

## *Abstract*

This paper explores the career of an unusual eighteenth-century innovator. George Boswell was not only the author of the first detailed and practical guide to the creation, lay-out and management of water meadows, but is also a good example of a working farmer eager to incorporate new ideas, new crops and improved implements into his farming practice. His advice was sought and his expertise valued by several leading agriculturalists during the late eighteenth century, including Arthur Young and Robert Bakewell. His letters to George Culley provide a great deal of information about farming methods and conditions in Dorset, and his contributions to the Bath and West Agricultural Society give details of his construction of and experiments with ploughs, rakes, drills and threshing machines.

George Boswell deserves to be remembered, not just as the author of an informative account of the techniques of watering meadows, but as a remarkable example of a practical farmer eager to embrace the latest farming advances, and as the respected correspondent and informant of some of the leading agricultural innovators of the time. His contributions to the early publications of the Bath and West of England Society and his experiments with ploughs, drills, threshing machines, new crops and improved methods make him of national rather than purely local importance. These achievements are the more noteworthy in that he spent his entire life as a hard-working tenant farmer, shopkeeper, land-agent and tithe-collector in the district around Puddletown in south Dorset, and seldom had the leisure or the money to travel far from home.

Little is known of his origin or early life, except that he was born in Norfolk in 1735, and came to Puddletown as a young man and spent the rest of his life there, with only occasional visits to his native county. It is probable that he came to Puddletown in the service of Robert Walpole, second Earl of Orford, whose principal seat was at Houghton in Norfolk. The Earl had acquired the manor of Puddletown through his marriage in 1724 to Margaret, daughter and heiress of Samuel Rolle of Heanton, Devon.<sup>1</sup> Another link with Norfolk was later provided by the Rev. Dr Philip Lloyd (1729–90), who had been a tutor to the family of Earl Temple of Stowe, Buckinghamshire and who became Dean of Norwich and vicar of Puddletown in 1765. The non-resident rector employed Boswell as his agent.<sup>2</sup> Soon after his arrival in Puddletown,

<sup>1</sup> J. Hutchins, *History of Dorset* (third edn, 1863–70), II, p. 615.

<sup>2</sup> Dorset Record Office (DRO), PE/PUD/IN5/1/1,

agreements and correspondence about Puddletown tithes, 1695–1822.

Boswell engaged in several business enterprises, as well as farming on his own account and acting as land agent for local landowners. On 12 June 1760 he married Sarah Chapman of Puddletown.<sup>3</sup> She was the daughter of the Rev. John Chapman, a schoolmaster who also took gentlemen's sons into his household as boarders. A detailed survey of the inhabitants of Puddletown made by the vicar in 1769 shows George Boswell and his wife Sarah living in the Market Place with three children, four servants and two of Sarah's unmarried sisters. There they had a shop selling groceries, clothing, cloth, buttons and thread.<sup>4</sup> George Boswell later appears in the Puddletown overseers' accounts as a supplier of bedding, tape, thread and buttons for the use of the parish poor.<sup>5</sup> In his correspondence he mentions his business as a maltster, and may also have been involved in tanning, since one of the buildings listed in the 1769 survey is described as 'Mr Boswell's Skin House'. The parish registers record that several children were born to George and Sarah Boswell, but most of them died in infancy, and only George (born 1761), Sarah (born 1768) and Samuel (born 1769) survived to adulthood.<sup>6</sup> George suffered from a severe mental disorder and in 1779 was confined in a private lunatic asylum at Halstock where he died sometime after 1790.<sup>7</sup> The parish register records that Sarah Boswell 'wife of Mr George Boswell' was buried on 10 July 1777. He did not re-marry. His household was managed and his children cared for by his sister-in-law; later his daughter Sarah kept house for him.

As well as his work as a land agent for the Earl of Orford and others, and his grocery and mercer's business, Boswell supervised the glebe lands for Dr Lloyd, collected the tithes, dealt with several complex tithe disputes and kept the non-resident vicar informed about local affairs. He represented the vicar in disagreements with local farmers over tithes due on items such as milk, wool, wood-faggots and lambs born to sheep temporarily pastured outside the parish. Later, Boswell leased the tithes himself. He was involved with other local landowners, including James Frampton of Moreton, the Rev. Dr Henry Arnold of Ilsington, who was a canon of Wells cathedral, and the Earl of Ilchester, representing them in dealings over enclosures on the nearby heath, forestry and land reclamation. In 1785 he provided detailed surveys and valuations of their Ilsington estate for the Arnold family, and continued for many years to be involved in the management of their property. In 1802, for example, he was given full power to act on behalf of the Arnolds in a complex dispute over the precise boundaries between their land and that of the adjacent Walpole estate.<sup>8</sup> It is clear from his letters that George Boswell had received a good education, and that he had a lively, enquiring and essentially practical mind. His main interest was in farming and especially in agricultural improvements. He was a practical farmer, renting land from various estates in Puddletown and district. He was involved in the management of the charity school at Puddletown, served as Overseer of the Poor in 1775, and was deeply concerned about the appalling conditions of the Dorset agricultural labourers. Boswell was evidently well-respected as a farmer and land agent, and in 1774 the Rev. Dr Philip Lloyd recommended him

<sup>3</sup> DRO, PE/PUD:RE 3/1, Puddletown Parish Register.

<sup>4</sup> C. L. Sinclair Williams (ed.), *Puddletown: an account of the inhabitants, 1769* (Dorset Record Soc., 11, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> DRO, PE/PUD/OV1/21/4; 5, Puddletown overseers' accounts.

<sup>6</sup> DRO, PE/PUD: RE 3/1.

<sup>7</sup> DRO, PE/PUD/IN5/1/1. I am grateful to Mrs Jennifer Hawker for supplying the information about the Halstock asylum.

<sup>8</sup> DRO D/PUD/M6-9, Earl of Orford's Puddletown estate, 1760-96; Wiltshire and Swindon Record Office (WSRO), 873/96, papers relating to Ilsington Farm, Puddletown.

to his patron, Earl Temple of Stowe, as a suitable man to survey and value a large estate at Eastbury in the parish of Tarrant Gunville which the Earl had inherited in 1762 from George Bubb Doddington.<sup>9</sup> In 1779 Dr Cummings, a respected physician from Dorchester, wrote to Edmund Rack, the secretary of the recently-formed Bath and West of England Agricultural Society, to recommend the experimental work of 'Mr Boswell, an ingenious Farmer in this neighbourhood'.<sup>10</sup> James Frampton granted Boswell a lease of Waddock Farm on the bank of the river Frome at Affpudde, three miles from Puddletown in 1790. Frampton recorded in his Estate Diary:

Waddock Farm has been in most slovenly hands and under sad management for a number of years, but is now lett to Mr George Boswell of Piddletown, who entered on it and has conducted it with uncommon spirit.

Frampton added that he had kept the rent low, below the market price on the grounds that Boswell would be 'a sensible, active, responsible and good tempered neighbour'. There could hardly be a warmer tribute to a tenant from his landlord. Waddock Farm comprised 344 acres and the rent was £260 per annum.<sup>11</sup>

## I

It is Boswell's activities as an agricultural improver and innovator that are particular interest. In his work as a land agent he regularly suggested improvements such as the introduction of turnips, sainfoin, vetches and buckwheat, together with close adherence to cropping rotations. For example, in a valuation of Ilsington Farm in 1785 Boswell recommended cultivation of some pasture to rid it of moss, and insisted that the tenant should not be permitted to take 'more than two crops of corn following Turnips, Fetches upon the same, or Buck Wheat ploughed in not esteemed a crop'.<sup>12</sup> He took particular pains in the cultivation of turnips, obtaining seed from different sources and asking Dr Lloyd to send him yellow turnip-seed from London. During the 1790s he obtained oats, peas and seed potatoes by sea from Northumberland, and 'Poland oats' which were imported into Weymouth.

Boswell was involved from the beginning with the Bath and West of England Agricultural Society founded in 1777, the earliest such society in the country. On 4 December 1777 Boswell sent to the Society a detailed description of a model plough which he had constructed with 'an accurate engraving on a scale of three inches to a foot'. Having made the plough himself, he was able to supply complete costings: 'carpenters bill 10s. *od.*, smiths bill for iron work 7s. *od.*, materials 3s. 6*d.*'.<sup>13</sup> The plough was described in great detail in the Society's second volume

<sup>9</sup> Huntingdon Library, Pasadena, Stowe Collection, STG Box 422. This letter was found by Mr George Clarke and I am indebted to him for providing me with a transcript of it.

<sup>10</sup> Bath Record Office, Bath and West of England Agricultural Society, First Correspondence Book, 1777-82, p. 224.

<sup>11</sup> DRO, D/FRA/E32, leases on the Frampton estate;

T9-10, Frampton Estate, Waddock Farm leases; E68, James Frampton's diary.

<sup>12</sup> WSRO, 873/96, papers relating to Ilsington Farm, c.1650-1814.

<sup>13</sup> Bath Record Office, Bath and West of England Agricultural Society, First Correspondence Book, pp. 44-49, 275-9.

of *Letters and Papers* in 1783, with a carefully-labelled drawing entitled 'Mr Boswell's Norfolk plough' showing its construction and dimensions. No doubt drawing upon his experience as a young man in Norfolk, Boswell designed his plough with one share and coulter attached to a sturdy beam with one handle and two wheels. He summarized 'the superior advantages of the Norfolk plough over every other sort I have seen' as follows:

It goes with only two horses without a ploughboy. Two good able horses with one of these ploughs will break up the strongest [level] land I ever saw in Somersetshire. At a proper season it will plough nearly an acre a day. Having but two horses, and those going a-breast the ploughman, can always see between them, and by that means draw out his work as straight as a line can be stretched. This makes his furrows as true and exact as it is possible to be conceived.

The contrast could not have been greater between Boswell's elegant plough and the heavy, cumbersome plough, known as a 'sull' or 'zull', then in common use in Dorset, and requiring four horses or six oxen to draw it.<sup>14</sup>

In 1779 Boswell wrote to the Bath and West Secretary, Edmund Rack, sending details of a machine which he had constructed 'for raking summer-corn stubbles'. He wrote that it was the Dorset practice to employ women with hand-rakes for this task, but that he had found it difficult to find a satisfactory labour force. He continued that 'having for many years used the Norfolk ploughs here, I thought a rake might be so constructed as to go on the breast-work of one of these ploughs in the same manner as the plough itself is used'. He gave details of his experiments with the implement, its construction and the manner of using it, and concluded that 'To my great satisfaction, I found it succeeded even beyond my expectation ... One horse and a boy to lead him, with a man to clear the rake, will easily rake twelve acres of stubble in a day, and if two horses are taken into the field to be used alternately, twenty acres might be raked in the same time, but this would be hard work for the man'. In September 1779 he attended a meeting of the Society to demonstrate his invention, and was warmly thanked for his contribution.<sup>15</sup> Later, he records the construction and experiments with seed drills and threshing machines.

It was, above all, his work on water meadows which established Boswell's reputation and importance. The technique of carefully-controlled watering of meadows to produce early grass had been introduced at Puddletown and Ilsington earlier than anywhere else in the country, and was already established there by the first decade of the seventeenth century. Nowhere was the technique of watering to encourage spring feed for sheep and lambs, to be followed by an abundant hay crop, better understood or practised than in this district lying between two chalkland rivers, the Piddle and the Frome. As early as 1605 there are references to channels and ditches being constructed across the Broadmoor at Puddletown, and to the creation of water meadows at Affpuddle in the same year.<sup>16</sup> In 1608 four tenants at Ilsington, encouraged

<sup>14</sup> Bath and West Society, *Letters and Papers on agriculture, planting etc* (14 vols, 1780–1816), II, pp. 356–60.

<sup>15</sup> Bath and West Society, *Letters and Papers*, I, (1780), pp. 45–50.

<sup>16</sup> J. Bettey, 'The Development of water meadows in Dorset during the seventeenth century', *AgHR* 25 (1977), pp. 37–43; id., 'The floated watermeadows of Wessex: a triumph of English agriculture' in H. Cook and T. Williamson (eds), *Watermeadows* (2007), pp. 8–22.

by the landowner, Henry Arnold, entered into a complex agreement to construct and maintain a watercourse 900 yards long and seven feet wide to bring water from the river Frome to water their meadows.<sup>17</sup> The practice had spread rapidly and by the end of the seventeenth century had become an essential feature of farming in the district, enabling large flocks of folding sheep to be kept and provided with grass during the 'hungry-gap' of early spring. In his *General View of the Agriculture of Dorset*, 1793, John Claridge reported that in Dorset 'the proportion of water meadows is no where so great, or any where better managed; the early vegetation produced by flooding is of such consequence to the Dorset farmer that without it their present system of managing sheep would be almost annihilated'.<sup>18</sup>

In farming at Puddletown and district Boswell had become an expert on the creation of water meadows and the techniques of watering, and in 1779 his book *A treatise on watering meadows* was published.<sup>19</sup> This brought him a national reputation as an exponent of agricultural improvement. The book was jointly dedicated to his landlord, James Frampton and to the Earl of Ilchester, the first president of the Bath and West Agricultural Society. Both men had encouraged Boswell to publish his work. The Rev. John Hutchins, the author of the magisterial *History of Dorset* first published in 1774, who spent his life in the district, evidently knew Boswell and was familiar with his work and local reputation. Hutchins described him as an ingenious farmer who had introduced new and successful agricultural methods, and added that the idea for a book on water meadows was suggested to Boswell 'by a gentleman to whom he had great obligations and who died before the publication of the third edition' (1790).<sup>20</sup> This was James Frampton who died in 1784. Frampton's farming methods and his large acreage of well-managed water meadows were highly commended by Arthur Young during his *Tour of Eastern England* in 1771.<sup>21</sup> Hutchins adds that Boswell was also 'encouraged by the correspondence of gentlemen in different parts of the kingdom, particularly the Rev Theophilus Houlbrook of Hollygrove, Salop'.<sup>22</sup> Boswell's book provided a full account of the methods and benefits of watering meadows, with detailed descriptions, plans and diagrams of hatches, channels, drains and tools. He addressed the practical problems of surveying, levelling, building hatches in the river bed and regulating the water to ensure swift, even flow over the whole surface of the meadow, adding that 'the art of watering consists in giving every part of the meadow its due quantity of water equally alike'. Boswell could claim that his book was the first detailed and illustrated description of all the techniques of watering meadows. He stressed that his work was the result of several years experience, 'the genuine work of a practical farmer', and assured his readers that 'the plans are actually drawn from meadows now watered'. He deplored the fact that so many large areas of land beside streams and rivers – which could easily be watered – were neglected, unimproved and boggy, 'a reproach to the age, a disgrace to the country, and a nuisance to the occupiers'. He provided a full account of the management of the meadows and details of the annual cycle of the work required

<sup>17</sup> WSRO, 873/96.

<sup>18</sup> J. Claridge, *A general view of the agriculture of Dorset* (1793), p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> The full title was *A treatise on watering meadows: wherein are shewn some of the many advantages arising from that mode of practice, particularly on coarse, boggy,*

*or barren land.*

<sup>20</sup> Hutchins, *Dorset*, II, p. 623.

<sup>21</sup> A. Young, *Farmer's Tour through the East of England*, (4 vols, 1771), III, pp. 283–6.

<sup>22</sup> Hutchins, *Dorset*, II, p. 623.

and summarized their advantages as increasing the supply of winter feed and consequently the quantity of manure for the farm; producing a good crop of hay even in a dry summer; providing abundant early grass for a flock of breeding ewes and their lambs before the natural growth of grass has occurred. Boswell saw the expense of maintaining the meadows as small in relation to the advantages. Moreover meadows brought social advantages, 'almost the whole of the expenses in this mode of cultivation is the actual manual labour of a class of people who have no genius to employ their bodily strength in other ways for their's and their family's support'.<sup>23</sup>

Boswell's book achieved considerable success. Whilst the first edition was privately printed, a second soon followed and a third was published by Debretts in 1790. The book was praised by John Claridge in 1793 and was warmly recommended by Thomas Bayley, a member of the Board of Agriculture, in a lecture on Manures in Manchester in 1785, which was later published. Bayley pointed out the efficacy of water as a manure and suggested that all who wished to improve their land by irrigation or floating should read Mr George Boswell's book.<sup>24</sup> The publication of his book brought Boswell to the attention of leading agriculturalists, including Robert Bakewell of Dishley, Leicestershire, who was engaged in an ambitious programme of livestock improvement by selective breeding. Bakewell came to Puddletown in 1788 to inspect Boswell's meadows for himself. In a letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, whose main interest was in his estate at Rydal, Westmorland, and who had asked for advice on creating water meadows, Bakewell wrote on 25 November 1788

I spent some days with Mr Boswell of Piddletons near Dorchester who has wrote a pamphlet on this subject which does him great credit and which I should recommend to those who wish for information in this way ... I have long considered the watering of land as the greatest of all improvements and the most neglected.<sup>25</sup>

In December 1788 Boswell recorded 'the Bishop of Llandaff has written twice to me upon the subject of watering of lands near Winander Meer [Windermere]'. Boswell invited the Bishop's steward to visit him at Puddletown. Shortly afterwards the Duke of Newcastle sent his 'master of works' to inspect Boswell's water meadows, the agricultural writer, Arthur Young, called on him, and he was contacted by William Colhoun, a progressive landowner of Wretham, Norfolk, who was a friend of Lord Orford. Later Boswell became more cautious in providing help and advice to the gentry, writing in 1789 (with reference to the Bishop of Llandaff) that as soon as their own purposes were served, wealthy landowners forgot their informant.<sup>26</sup>

In 1783 Boswell was invited to write a paper for the Bath and West Society 'On watering

<sup>23</sup> Boswell, *Treatise on watering meadows*, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas B. Bayley, *Thoughts on collecting and preserving different substances for manure* (1796), pp. 18–19.

<sup>25</sup> H. C. Pawson, *Robert Bakewell* (1957), p. 135.

<sup>26</sup> Boswell's letters have been printed in J. F. James and J. H. Bettey (eds), *Farming in Dorset* (Dorset Rec. Soc. 13, 1993), pp. 117–68, from originals in the Northumberland RO, ZCU/12–27. In this instance the references are to letters of 27 Dec. 1788 (p. 135), 2 Oct. 1792 (p. 152) and

14 Mar. and 9 Sept. 1787 (pp. 127, 132). The Bishop of Llandaff, the Right Rev. Richard Watson, seldom visited his diocese, devoting himself to farming on his estate. He was also Professor of Chemistry at Cambridge although he confessed that on his appointment, he knew nothing of it, having 'never read a syllable on the subject nor seen a single experiment'. *ODNB*, sub Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff (1737–1816).

meadows; and the kinds of water found most efficacious for that purpose.' In his paper Boswell emphasized the benefits of clear chalkland water coming straight from a river or stream, and which had not previously been used for watering meadows. He pointed out that experienced watermen claimed that the best water came from near the spring-head or source of the stream. He also discussed in detail the different effects which water had upon various soils, and emphasized that by far the best meadows were those consisting of a light loam with well-drained gravel sub-soil. Upon such meadows, he claimed, the water 'without any foreign assistance has an amazing effect; the fertilizing quality is really astonishing,' providing early grass followed by an abundant and reliable hay crop. He refers to correspondence he had had with Arthur Young who had sought his opinion on the same subject, and the fact that Dr Joseph Priestley had quoted a passage from his book in support of 'a new theory of vegetation, by his phlogiston.' In this paper, as elsewhere, Boswell emphasized his own practical knowledge of the subject, declaring 'I write from facts that are every day under my eye.'<sup>27</sup>

In 1789 a Gloucestershire clergyman, the Revd Thomas Wright, who was curate of South Cerney, published a short pamphlet entitled *An account of the advantages and method of watering meadows by art*, based on the system he had seen being used along the river Churn which is a tributary of the Thames. Wright became rector of Ould in Northamptonshire and in 1790 published a much fuller second edition of his work, adding 'as practised in the county of Gloucestershire' to the title. Boswell was scathing in his criticism of Wright's publication, describing the work as superficial and erroneous. In particular, Boswell disagreed with Wright's views on the quality of water best suited to promote an early growth of grass on meadows. Wright, describing methods on the claylands of the upper Thames valley, emphasized the benefits of muddy water during winter floods, whereas Boswell, laid stress on the efficacy of clear water from chalk streams. Wright also claimed that Boswell was mistaken over the qualities of land suitable for watering, the nature of the best sub-soils, the length of time that a meadow should be watered, and over the best methods of building weirs and hatches. In a letter to George Culley of 1789, Boswell wrote

Have you seen a new treatise upon water meadows by a clergyman in Gloucestershire, if not I dare say you will. People in their zeal for a cause they've espoused generally think they can never point out the advantages too strongly – but by over doing it they often hurt it, such you will find to be the case there.<sup>28</sup>

In a letter to Culley in October 1789, Boswell again referred to Wright's work and added:

He [Wright] has stated some facts directly opposite to what I had advanced so strongly – that a gentleman, Mr Keld of Beverley in Yorkshire, came to my house, on purpose from London to ascertain the fact (viz. that water as clear as chrystal issuing from springs near, has made as great improvement upon the land as can possibly be conceived) – I carried him to the meadows and convinced him.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Bath and West of England Society, *Letters and Papers*, II, pp. 85–93. Letter 6, April 1789.

<sup>28</sup> James and Bettey (eds), *Farming in Dorset*, p. 141, Letter 7, 25 Oct. 1789.

It was through Robert Bakewell's recommendation that the progressive Northumberland farmer, George Culley, made contact with Boswell. Culley had been a pupil of Bakewell, and with his brother Matthew, was farming a large acreage at Fenton, Northumberland.<sup>30</sup> His approach to Boswell resulted in a long correspondence between 1787 and 1805, of which Boswell's letters have survived among the Culley papers, although with a gap between 1796 and 1804. Sadly, Culley's letters to Boswell have disappeared. Boswell's letters are extremely informative about Dorset farming, with details of cultivation, prices, improved methods and especially concerning livestock husbandry and the management of water meadows. The letters describe Boswell's experiments with spring-sown vetches, rye, clover, drill-sown turnips and winter housing for dairy cows, mentioning the fact that 'cow houses are new things here'.<sup>31</sup> They reveal that in 1788–9 George Culley sent one of his labourers, Henry Rutherford, to Puddletown to be taught the techniques for making and maintaining water meadows. Rutherford remained at Puddletown for several months before returning to Fenton and establishing water meadows there. Boswell laid stress on the fact that the man sent by Culley should be 'a labourer and to be both willing and able to go through the manual part of the work in all weather, as the watermen do here'. He was to come in October and remain until April, 'that is the full season for watering meadows with us'. Boswell agreed to instruct him in the techniques, to show him different meadows and methods, and added:

A few years since I watered above twenty acres which were never watered before, that will be a model for him, if well attended to.

Fears that a man coming from Northumberland might not be accepted in Dorset were brushed aside:

His speech and dialect will be no objection. I have the pleasure to say this part of the kingdom amongst the lower class are not deficient in civility to strangers, and I shall with great readiness take him under my protection and show him some degree of attention.<sup>32</sup>

Henry Rutherford's time in Dorset was evidently successful, and in subsequent letters Boswell frequently sent good wishes and messages to him in Northumberland.

Having established a reputation for his writings on water meadows, Boswell tried his hand at other forms of improvement. In 1802 he took a 25-year lease of Oakers Wood from the Frampton estate. This was an area of 125 acres of poor heath and woodland north-east of Waddock Farm. The rent was only a guinea a year, because the ground was said to be in a miserable state, but Boswell undertook to build a farmhouse, barn and stable. The buildings were duly erected by 1809, but in spite of all Boswell's strenuous efforts to convert this poor acidic heathland into a productive farm, the land remained stubbornly unresponsive, and the lease was abandoned

<sup>30</sup> S. MacDonald, 'George Culley of Fenton', *Archaeologia Aeliana*, fifth ser., 3, (1975), pp. 131–41; Anne Orde (ed.), *Matthew and George Culley: travel journals and letters* (British Academy Records of social and economic history, new ser., 35, 2002); Orde (ed.), *Matthew and George Culley: farming letters* (Surtees Soc., 210, 2006). And see also D. J. Rowe, 'The Culleys, Northumberland

Farmers, 1767–1813', *AgHR* 19 (1971), pp. 156–74 and Anne Orde, 'The Culleys and farm management', *Northern Hist.*, 41 (2004), pp. 327–38.

<sup>31</sup> James and Bettey (eds), *Farming in Dorset*, p. 135, Letter 4, 27 Dec. 1788.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 127–8, Letter 1, 14 Mar. 1787.

in 1815 by Boswell's son, Samuel, after his father's death. In the Frampton Estate Diary in 1815, James Frampton recorded that he proposed to plant most of the land with trees:

On application from Mr Samuel Boswell I this year took off his hands the remainder of his lease of Oakers Wood grounds, and in consideration of the money expended by his father in building there, I agreed to pay him twenty four pounds per annum from Michaelmas 1816 for the twelve years of his Lease which were unexpired. These grounds not answering for tillage I determined on planting the greater part of them reserving only a few fields round the house for the use of any person who might occupy it.<sup>33</sup>

## II

Boswell's letters to Culley provide a great deal of information about Dorset sheep, the grazing routine and folding of the sheep flocks, the introduction of cultivated grasses, turnips and new varieties of wheat and barley. He described the marketing of sheep, the importance of the west-country sheep fairs, the sales of in-lamb ewes and the demand for sheep to feed convicts in the hulks at Portsmouth. The corn prices which he quotes fluctuated wildly, and in December 1788 he wrote that the price of malting barley had fallen disastrously low because of the abundance of cider apples, 'the amazing crops of apples in the neighbouring counties has made the barley a dull commodity at market'.<sup>34</sup> In 1790 he referred to a problem affecting Dorset tenant farmers which arose from the sporting rights enjoyed by landlords, 'the gentlemen sportsmen who are the greatest tyrants in the kingdom are over the fields every day and if any late corn is out uncut they are beating for game all over it'.<sup>35</sup> Boswell gives details of his experiments in making and using seed drills and a threshing machine. In January 1789 he wrote:

I have been some time endeavouring to invent a machine for drilling all sorts of corn and seeds, upon a different principle from any I have heard of, for I have seen none except drawings. I constructed one late last wheat season and it seemed to answer very well. ... One difficulty I met with and which I was not aware of, the delivering more grain out going down the hills than when going up – that I think I have now got over. ... My principal plan is for corn and I have it in contemplation, and I think with certainty, to sow barley or oats in drills and the broad clover broad-cast at the same time and with the same machine.<sup>36</sup>

By April 1789 he could report 'My drill plough will, I think, answer my expectation'.<sup>37</sup> He had successfully drilled oats and peas, and by adding a third horse hoped to drill seven acres a day.

With a few exceptions, Boswell was not impressed by the quality of his neighbours' farming and livestock management. In 1787, for example, he complained to Culley that

We are very inattentive to stock of any kind, except some farmers in respect of the ewe flock – and even there they are well contented if they don't decline in quality, having scarce a wish

<sup>33</sup> DRO, D/FRA/E 69, Frampton estate diary 1802, 1809, 1815.

<sup>34</sup> James and Betty (eds), *Farming in Dorset*, p. 134, Letter 4, 27 Dec. 1788.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148, Letter 10, 11–13 Dec. 1790.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 136–7, Letter 5, 24 Jan. 1789.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138, Letter 6, 6 Apr. 1789.

to improve (I mean with any expense). Mr Bakewell will never make converts of our farmers, for he is esteemed here the best farmer who gets the most money, and which is generally done where there are least outgoings.<sup>38</sup>

In 1790 he lamented that so little attention was paid to improving the quality of the folding sheep flocks on which the fertility of the thin chalkland soils depended, 'We have not a farmer in the county I believe that would give twenty guineas, or hardly half the money, for the best ram in England.'<sup>39</sup> A letter of 2 October 1792 described George III's holiday visits to Weymouth and his tours of local farms, upbraiding farmers for thistles and anthills. Boswell quotes the King's rebukes, 'bad farmers, bad, bad, farmers, thistles, thistles, thistles farmer, earth hills, earth hills farmer everywhere, they should be cut, yes cut, cut and kept neat.'<sup>40</sup>

Boswell was concerned about the condition of the poor and the plight of the poorly-paid labourers in Dorset, and fearful of civil unrest during the Napoleonic War. He was particularly exercised over the shortage of food for labourers during the summer of 1795 when there was a persistent fear of riots. In July 1795 he wrote that like many other farmers, he was supplying corn to the labourers at below cost, and that county-wide subscriptions were being raised to support the poor in an attempt to prevent 'troublesome and riotous' behaviour or actual starvation.<sup>41</sup> Boswell's son, Samuel, joined the Volunteers at Weymouth during the invasion threat of 1804, and Boswell took his daughter to view the military exercises held on the downs in the presence of the King. He wrote that:

I should have scarce believed my son Samuel would ever have put on a Red Coat, yet he has with the Company been on permanent duty at Weymouth for a month, without being one day absent, or once home. I had six of my own men doing duty in it all the time; the day they marched to Weymouth was the day of the alarm of the French being landed in Portland; they were ordered to march as expeditiously as possible with twenty rounds of ball cartridges per man; they gave three Huzzas and marched off from Dorchester within half an hour. It turned out a false alarm.<sup>42</sup>

During the invasion scare Boswell was named as one of the volunteers charged with the task of driving livestock away from the coastal region and evacuating the district if the French should land.<sup>43</sup>

Boswell's life was not without difficulties and disappointments. As already mentioned several of his children died at birth or in infancy, and his wife, Sarah, died in 1777 at the age of 45. The severe mental disorder suffered during the 1790s by his eldest son George, and his eventual confinement in a lunatic asylum, was deeply troubling and extremely expensive. Moreover, while still living at home, George had destroyed many valuables and much equipment. Boswell's financial difficulties were compounded by a series of dry summers and poor harvests and meant that in 1795 he was unable to pay George Culley for seed which had been supplied to him. It may be that it was embarrassment over this episode which led to a

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133, Letter 3, 9 September 1787.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148, Letter 10, 11–13 December 1790.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150, Letter 11, 2 October 1792.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156, Letter 13, 14 July 1795.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164, Letter 16, 6 July 1804.

<sup>43</sup> DRO, OV/1/18, Puddletown overseers' records.

gap of eight years in the letters between 1796 and 1804. In July 1793 Boswell had confessed to Culley that:

I have more sincere trouble and concern upon my spirits and hands than I ever hope to experience again. The various bankruptcies and stopping of principal houses have so affected our concerns that we hardly know which way to turn ... my next neighbor and most intimate friend ... Mr Masterman has lately stopped for £15,000. I had not the least suspicion of it.<sup>44</sup>

In July 1795 he wrote again 'I tell you truly and honestly that I was ashamed to write because from some very untoward circumstances, I was not able to make you a remittance, believe me I have, from the almost total failure of last year's crops of corn and turnips been really distressed'.<sup>45</sup> He added that labourers and their families were having great difficulty in obtaining food, and that 'in the trade I am in, grocer and mercers' shop, there is scarce any money to be taken'.<sup>46</sup> It was at about this time that Boswell ceased to subscribe to the Bath and West Society.

### III

It is, above all, in his letters to George Culley that we can see Boswell's personality, his enquiring mind and deep interest in all aspects of contemporary agriculture and agricultural improvement, and his eagerness to learn about new developments in farming methods. By December 1789 Boswell had turned his attention to making a threshing machine and wrote thanking Culley for sending detailed drawings of a machine made by John Bailey, who was estate manager for Lord Tankerville of Chillingham Castle, Northumberland, and who later joined with George Culley in writing the *General View of the Agriculture of Northumberland, Westmorland and Cumberland* (1805). Boswell sent a detailed list of questions concerning the machine, with suggestions for modifications and enquiries about a chaff-cutter, a machine to swindle flax, bruise flax seed for calves, slice turnips and 'an Engine to cut Tobacco that go by water'. John Bailey evidently answered all the questions, and in January 1790 Boswell sent him thanks 'for his obliging attention and trouble ... [which] made everything perfectly intelligible'.<sup>47</sup>

In 1793 Boswell was invited by Sir John Sinclair, the chairman of the newly-formed Board of Agriculture, to come to London and supervise 'an experiment of watering Hyde Park and Saint James Park'. He ignored the invitation on the sensible grounds that Sir John Sinclair was 'quite ignorant of my situation in life, it will not suit my inclinations nor pocket to go two hundred miles at my expense to gratify the idle curiosity of every person that chuse to ask it'.<sup>48</sup> It is a measure of Boswell's reputation in the county that in 1796 he was invited to correct the *General View of the Agriculture of Dorset*, which had been written for the Board of Agriculture by the Dorset Surveyor, John Claridge, and which had attracted a good deal of criticism from local landowners and farmers. Boswell declined this commission too, since the Board would not provide 'a promise of my real expenses being repaid me'. His final publication was a long letter, published in the *Farmer's Magazine* in 1804, in which he reported on weather conditions in

<sup>44</sup> James and Betty (eds), *Farming in Dorset*, p. 155, Letter 12, 25 July 1793.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156, Letter 13, 14 July 1795.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157, Letter 13, 14 July 1795.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145, Letter 9, 14 Jan. 1790.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155, Letter 12, 25 July 1793.

Dorset throughout the previous year, crops and yields of wheat, barley and turnips and sales of sheep, lambs and swine. In this letter he emphasized the crucial importance of the sheep flocks and the fold, 'sheep and lambs entirely engage the farmers' attention – everything gives way to the sheep system'. He described the value of the sheep fold enabling 500 sheep to manure an acre of ground each week, and provided details of the large flocks and the early lambing habit of the Dorset Horns, writing that 'one farmer in the neighbourhood has more than 600 lambs already'.<sup>49</sup>

## IV

George Boswell died in August 1815 at the age of 80. His finances had evidently recovered despite his improving lease of Oakers Wood. In his will dated 28 June 1813, he described himself as 'George Boswell, gentleman, of Piddletown in the county of Dorset'.<sup>50</sup> By this time his daughter, Sarah, had married William Noyle, Esq., of Withycombe Raleigh, near Exmouth.<sup>51</sup> By her father's will she was left for her sole use the income of £2000 invested in stock at three per cent. To his three sisters, who were all widows, and to their children and to the children of his brother, Thomas, Boswell left small legacies. All the rest of his estate, including copyhold tenements called Arnolds and Sturmeys and a leasehold estate in Puddletown called Duckhole, he left to his son, Samuel, who acted as his executor.<sup>52</sup>

Boswell's publications and letters reveal him both as an enthusiast for all forms of agricultural improvement, and as a practical tenant farmer intent on using the best methods in watering meadows, sheep-flock management, arable cultivation, the use of turnips, clover, vetches, potatoes and other crops which few other local farmers had introduced. Although not affluent, he was ready to experiment with his own designs for ploughs, rakes, drills and threshing machines, and eager to spread his ideas as widely as possible. He was evidently well respected and recognized as an energetic and successful farmer. His local reputation was summed up in 1793 by John Claridge who, having praised Boswell's 'ingenious publication' on water meadows, added:

I cannot help remarking here for Mr Boswell's credit, that I found him (who is a native of Norfolk) making use of Norfolk ploughs, drawn by two horses; his turnips excellent, and his system of tillage carrying on with the greatest success ... proof of the practicability of the improvement I could wish to enforce throughout the county.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>49</sup> *Farmer's Magazine*, V (1804), pp. 114–8.

<sup>50</sup> Throughout his life George Boswell used the traditional name 'Piddletown'. The local gentry had already adopted the alternative, more genteel form 'Puddletown'.

<sup>51</sup> The marriage was announced in *The Morning Chronicle*, 1 Dec. 1807.

<sup>52</sup> TNA, PROB 11/1571/417.

<sup>53</sup> Claridge, *General View ... Dorset*, p. 36.