

Sir Richard Weston and the Spread of Clover Cultivation

By A. R. MICHELL

THE first edition of Sir Richard Weston's *Discours of Husbandrie used in Brabant and Flanders* was published in 1650 by Samuel Hartlib. It had probably been written five years before, and reached Hartlib in an anonymous imperfect copy.¹ By May 1651 it was out of print, and in such demand that the printer urged Hartlib to prepare a new edition. Hartlib had by this time discovered the identity of the author and wrote two letters to him asking him to provide a corrected copy, letters which were never answered.² However, Hartlib noted in the introduction to the second edition that "the use of the Clover-seed is found by experience not to have been sufficiently explained in the discours," and added that Blyth would supplement what was said in his third edition of the *English Improver* for the benefit of "every unexperienced Husbandman."

A recently discovered letter written by Weston, probably the only surviving document in the knight's hand, throws light both on his practice regarding clover, and on the process of diffusion of innovation. Weston himself believed that an innovator would "not onely bee imitated but also honoured by" his neighbours, and that "When your Neighbours see your Labors thrive and prosper . . . when they once see your Crops, and somewhat understand that you do reap som benefit by them, they will com to you as to an Oracle to ask your Counsel."³ The letter was written to a neighbour, John Lloyd of Woking, in response to Lloyd's inquiry on behalf of a friend. Lloyd himself appears to have taken no active interest in clover, although his lands lay

on very similar ground to those of Weston. He was a newcomer with only a temporary interest in the estate through his wife, the widow of James Zouche (one of the leading West Surrey landowners), that would pass to her son on his majority. After the Restoration Lloyd retired to his estates in the Forest, Carmarthen, whence he had come, and it is quite possible that the friend on whose behalf he was enquiring lived in Carmarthenshire.⁴

The letter dated February 1650/1 commences with some polite remarks about the health of Lloyd's wife and then deals directly with clover.

. . . I have made my men try what they can to gett some clover grasse seed out of the huske but they cannot doe it till March, I thinke that it must first be laid abroad a drying in the sun some 3 or 4 hours before it is thresht, then it will come out and there is noe other way to get it out of the huske that I find unlesse the weather be so faire at harvest that it may be threshed out in the feild which is was not this year [1650] heere with us. There is one Mr Sadler in Bucklersbury⁵ that useth to sell of this seed and I have bought my selfe of him this three or four years. If any friend of yours will send to him for it in my name, I presume he will helpe him to the best he hath. The best directions I can give sowe it is uppon barly. After that is sowed and harrowed then sowe about 10 ponds of Clover grasse seed uppon an acre and harrowe it once or twice in place agane after that it sowed. This is after you intend to lay it up wholly for grasse, but if one would sowe a smalle quantity of grond

¹ *A Discours of Husbandrie used in Brabant and Flanders*, 1650, B.M. E613:12; 1652 B.M. 234. e. 32. The general details of Weston's life are well known and have often been repeated, e.g. D.N.B.; F. Harrison, *Annals of an Old Manor House*, 1899, pp. 120-33.

² B.M. 234. e. 32, introduction and appendix.

³ *Discours*, 2nd edn, p. 26.

⁴ If he had lived in west Surrey he would almost certainly have approached Weston directly.

⁵ A London street which survives to this day.

for trial it must be digged up or rather trenched ready about mid march and then sowed according to the same proportion of seed for a lesser quantity of ground.¹

The letter suggests that Weston was still experimenting with clover. His *Discours*, which of course reports only his observations abroad and not his actual experiments, had dealt in some detail with the problem of a surplus of clover seed.² It is clear that by 1650 Weston was far from solving the problem of seed supply. It is perhaps indicative of the total separation of Hartlib's circle from Weston that in the second edition Hartlib recommends to his readers an entirely different supplier of seed, "Mr James Long's Shop at the Barge on Billingsgate."³

It may be that the fact that Weston's land was now rented from the sequestration com-

mittee for £200 p.a. hindered his experiments.⁴ Certainly the financial records of that committee which show a steadily increasing proportion of the rent left unpaid in successive years do not suggest that Weston, for all his improvements, had stepped into the promised land as suddenly as he promised his readers an improver would.⁵ This however may be an unfair view, since he was simultaneously expending vast sums in making the river Wey navigable from the Thames to Guildford.⁶ It was the success of this project which ultimately made dairy farming along the Wey valley, supplying the London market, a very prosperous undertaking and assisted the spread of improved grasses. Thus an early eighteenth-century writer was able to say of Weston, "the whole shire is indebted to him" for introducing clover and sainfoin.⁷

¹ P.R.O. C108/255. This material relates solely to Lloyd and the Zouche estates.

² *Discours*, pp. 23-6.

³ *Ibid.*, 2nd edn, final note. Hartlib says *passim* that he sent his two letters "by a friend of yours and mine." Weston's failure to reply is somewhat puzzling. The letter printed above shows he was willing to correspond on the subject with neighbours in February, yet not with Hartlib in May.

⁴ P.R.O. E112/338/70. Weston's case was extremely complicated since he was a Catholic who had some of his lands seized on account of his religion before the Civil War. *Calendar of the proceedings of the Committee for Compounding III*, 2291-4. There appears to have been some confusion over whether Weston should have paid £160 or £200 rent.

⁵ *Discours*, *passim*, esp. pp. 18-19. In addition to using clover, turnips, and other grasses, Weston said he had already by 1640 "improved my land as much as any man in the kingdom by fire and by water."—*Ibid.*, p. 5. Fire refers to devonshiring or denshiring which was a common practice in Surrey, and water apparently to the floating of water meadows. Weston held lands in Herefordshire and had similarly experimented with crops there before the war, and may have been familiar with Vaughan's original Golden Valley project on the ground.—*Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁶ G.M.R. Wey Navigation Deeds. For a brief summary see P. Vine, *London's Lost Route to the Sea*, Newton Abbot, 1965, pp. 8-13.

⁷ B.M. Add. 6171, 17.