

The Tariff Commission Report

By G E FUSSELL

TOWARDS the end of the nineteenth century there were difficulties, hardships and suffering, because the progress of mechanical invention had already begun to reduce the world to a neighbourhood. The difficulties of the rural population, from landlord to labourer, became so marked that there was a certain political sympathy with Joseph Chamberlain's policy of a tariff on imported goods, grain, cattle, and other products. Therefore the 1908 Tariff Commission was appointed, and this dealt with many things besides the rural interests, but volume 3 of its report was the *Report of the Agricultural Committee*, of which the second edition appeared in 1906.

The members of the Agricultural Committee of the Tariff Commission of 1905 were either landowners or men who farmed large acreages. This particular report was intended to support a specific political purpose, and was undeniably a rather prejudiced production: nevertheless, allowing for prejudice, the descriptions by farmers, mostly on the larger scale, of their proceedings are a more or less complete description of the situation of the 'agricultural interest' at that time.

The *Report* opened with a discourse on agricultural policy before 1846! It barely accepted the situation that the world was in a state of change from the social organization where the landowners, the farmers, and the labourers were the supports of society to a time when the hammering of the machine was to rule the world. As Gilbert Cannan put it in 1917, 'The state is to be a machine. It used to be a kind of dining and debating society, but this is at an end. The factory system is to be extended to the general affairs of the community. The code for national affairs is no longer the country estate, the manor, but the factory'.

When this Commission sat and cogitated so profoundly the technique of farming had not changed very materially from earlier times. The system of landholding, the coming of the steam tractor, which was used in a relatively minor way, the reaper-binder and other innovations, such as the Ivel tractor, presaged a new age that was in its birth throes. The farmers who gave evidence to Joseph Chamberlain's Tariff Commission of 1905 had few inhibitions. They underlined their difficulties in a rather emphatic way. Their descriptions of their situation, economic and technical, create a feeling of surprise that they should continue to farm and did not take up some more remunerative occupation. Some, indeed, did supplement their farming by becoming land agents, valuers, hay and straw merchants, or following other possibly more remunerative occupations.

The footnotes to the historical section of the *Report* refer to a great many works that are today infrequently consulted, and this part of the *Report* is well worth reading, and is possibly instructive, as is section (B) 'Agriculture in the nineteenth century', although this is satisfied that no better measure of the rate of improvement can be found than the growth of enclosures 'because this meant the destruction of the old method of husbandry and the introduction of the rotation of crops and scientific husbandry', which may be regarded in the light of twentieth-century research as something of a simplification and exaggeration. There is, however, a good deal of useful information in the tables and graphs by which the subject is illumined and expanded.

Section (C) examines international conditions and the experience of foreign countries, but all this would need a book-length

exegesis to explore. However, a comment upon the numerous tables of one kind and another is necessary. They are not perhaps original but very comprehensive. The part that is of direct importance here is Part (F), 'Experiences of farmers' which professes to be without prejudice or criticism of the evidence given by practical farmers, and declares that it uses the actual words of the witnesses themselves — a council of perfection, but not impossible. How can I summarize them other than in the words of the *Report* itself?

The witnesses were very numerous: some 2250 farmers and agriculturists (a distinction that is not clear to me!), holding or owning farms of a gross acreage of some 1,900,000 acres, an impressive total. But was it a class enquiry? Few, if any, smallholders were called upon to give evidence, and perhaps their testimony would have been of little value for the purposes of the enquiry. At all events, few of these people were approached to give evidence, which, perhaps in the social structure of the time, is comprehensible.

The *Report* goes on to discuss crops, a term which was then apparently all-embracing including, as the current Agricultural Statistics did, wheat, barley, oats, peas, beans, maize, and rice, though of the last two there could have been no more than a minimal acreage.

But it is Section F, 'Experiences of farmers', that is of importance to historians, as it was to the politicians of that time. These experiences were uniformly adverse; this was the general context of the oral or written statements made to the Commissioners. Their pleas were printed verbatim in Sections III and V of the *Report*. Section F is arranged under headings entitled Corn Crops, which in turn is split up into wheat, barley, oats, beans and peas, and finally green crops, and pasture, but this seems to me to be making divisions in farming procedure that could not at that time be made. The rotations which

every farmer was then obliged to follow in the cropping of his land made his activities inextricably intermixed: crop succession and animal maintenance were tied up together in a way that modern farmers of the present could hardly appreciate, conditions having so materially changed. There is today no necessary contingent nexus between animal and crop husbandry. They can be, if they are not always, quite separate undertakings. This was not so in 1900! But the different headings by crop in this *Report* were not justified even in those days, for all cropping, and indeed animal husbandry, was a necessary sequence of crops, and a consequent supply of animal feed.

So the division of the *Report* into remarks upon the various crops seems to me to be arbitrary, but we are obliged to accept that is its form. First of all it is perhaps necessary to outline the usual system of farming pursued at that time. It was mixed farming: growing crops for human consumption and crops for animal consumption to make them in turn fit for human consumption, not forgetting the by-products, hides, hoofs, bones, wool, then an economic factor of great importance, and some minor crops like flax, hemp and hops.

The economic circumstances were not completely disastrous. Some few farmers were able to oppose them with profitable results though these were few enough, or at least few enough who would or could acknowledge that things were not so bad as they were represented to be: it was, it might be assumed, that the far-seeing and successful farmer was able to keep his head above water. Even so, and with all their complaints, the *Report* supplies a more or less unprejudiced sketch of farming as it was practised at the beginning of this century.

Farmers from all over the country, including Ireland, gave evidence to the Agricultural Committee, and their evidence

was pretty well uniform, though a caveat must be entered because nearly all the men who gave evidence were in a substantial way of business and, it would appear, were managing to survive. Nevertheless, they did not fail to underline their difficulties, although landlords who feared financial losses, if not bankruptcy, were rather more than willing to make reductions in rents and to make other allowances. (A quite disproportionate number of Irish farmers gave evidence, not considered here, but it can be supposed that Chamberlain was trying to attract the Irish vote in the House of Commons.)

The majority of the witnesses whose evidence is summarized, and somewhat arbitrarily selected, said that wheat could no longer be grown profitably since the bad seasons of some 20 years before. They declared, with some unanimity, that they grew it less for the grain than for the straw, which seems a trifle specious, but may not then have been so.

Oats, on the contrary, were profitable, and this, in the transport conditions of that time, is readily understood. The world of internal transport was heavily dependent upon animal traction, and animals must be fed. Oats were needed, therefore, not only on the farms but in local urban and metropolitan markets. Several farmers declared that they were growing more oats than they did 20 years ago; but already a formidable change was under way for the farm tractor had been invented, though it was after this time, and only under the pressure of war conditions, that it began to be used with some frequency.

Of course, different rotations were practised on the light land and the heavy clays. The great improvements of a century or more before this time had been on light soils; the heavy clays formed what was called wheat and bean land. There is a suggestion that there was a widespread decrease in the cultivation of peas and beans. Where there had been an increase it

had apparently been a substitution of other corn crops, chiefly wheat, but one corn merchant spoke of sainfoin and other seeds taking the place of beans.

Some rather surprising arguments were advanced by some of the farmers. One of the least surprising is that it paid to grow wheat, which might be described as the *primum mobile*. In fact it is almost impossible to distinguish between the arguments advanced at that time in support of the impossible economic conditions in which the farmers 'starved', and those which have always existed. Potato growing was a spreading and apparently remunerative crop. Forward looking men spoke of the cultivation of sugar beet, but the crop was handicapped by the necessity for capital to be invested in the 'erection of sugar factories in suitable localities', something that took nearly half a century to accomplish. There is no doubt that some kind of grass (not cultivated pasture) was encroaching on some of what had been productive arable land. Such grass was of very little value as grazing since it was deficient in all the virtues of cultivated pasture which was a part of a well considered and carefully planned system, but there is no doubt, though there is no measure of it, that a great deal of former arable land was then allowed to deteriorate into a semi-wild pasture, quite a large proportion of which must have been innutritious weeds. The rotation grasses that had been useful in keeping up the fertility of the land in mixed farming areas were rather denigrated by some of the witnesses. The sainfoin of the Oxfordshire and Berkshire Downs, which is now recognized as a major factor in maintaining the fertility (for corn crops) of these down lands, was a commonplace of that time, and possibly not fully appreciated. There was no optimism in the minds of the farmers who supplied evidence to the Tariff Commission. It can perhaps be agreed that there was a marked diminution in the arable acreage, but to confirm this

the *Agricultural Returns: Statistics* must be consulted (see Table 1). The vague and emotional statements of farmers who were feeling the pinch of changing circumstances can only be accepted at their own assessment. They recognized the disease, but in the absence of any protective duties, the generality of the witnesses could do little more than register their current difficulties, and hope for what may have seemed to them to be the universal panacea, import duties on imported corn and beef: so it went on from witness to witness.

Their evidence, however, had a virtue that they could not foresee! It was that they told the Commissioners precisely how they farmed. Naturally most of the men who gave evidence deplored the diminution of their arable farming, and were not impressed by the consequence of letting land fall down to grass. Some farmers had laid land down to lucerne 'in Hampshire, Kent, and the Home Counties generally, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Hereford, Monmouth and other counties', a sufficiently vague statement. Buying cake as a substitute for wheat was one remedy but could be carried too far. Straw sold at a profit could be compensated by the use of malt coombs and pig food, which meant that the loss in straw was put back by the resulting excreta from the pigs, etc, a process that some farmers in Hertfordshire, Essex and Cambridgeshire found advantageous. There was some competition from imported hay, competition that had not existed 25 years before, but now was measured at some 6000 or 7000 tons a week, presumably imported into London to feed the horses which were the motive power of passenger and materials transport. The market for home-produced hay and straw was diminished by government purchases from continental sources of the greater part of the forage used by the Army horses. The farmers consulted were in favour of an import duty.

Besides the cultivation of grain and legumes or roots and clover, which has so far been discussed, and may perhaps be nominated the norm of farming of that day, combined as it was with cattle breeding and keeping, the dairy, and sheep herding, there were in some districts specialist crops. Foremost amongst these were the flax cultivation for the linen industry of Northern Ireland. Even so there were complaints that the competition of imported flax, from Russia and Belgium in particular, was so severe that there had been some reduction, one not confined to any particular place but that was more or less general in Antrim, Fermanagh, Down, Londonderry, and other counties — a real tale of woe. This was unfortunate, because the flax was processed into linen as well as being a crop on the ground.

I do not think the abortive attempt to grow tobacco in Ireland need be discussed here. The cultivation of hops in the south-eastern counties is quite another matter. The crop was formerly grown on some 57,000 acres but, like other produce requiring skilled and continuous attention, the acreage had dropped to about 48,000 acres in 1904. The *Report* said, 'After the abnormally high price of hops in 1882 the general adoption of hop washing and a higher standard of farming led to the growing of heavier and more regular crops'. But at the same time there were increased imports from the Continent and the United States, causing a drop in prices and a reduction of the acreage under the crop. The consequence was a marked diminution of the labour employed. In 1878 about 8000 more men were employed in growing the crop, and so it is said the number of casual pickers employed for a few weeks in the summer had decreased by no less than 29,000 men, women and children.

Some consideration must also be given to market gardening and the production of soft fruit, coupled with that of orchards,

but it would be possible here to be too expansive though these subjects were discussed at length by some witnesses. These crops were important, or rather more than important: the life blood of the districts where they were the major saleable crops, such as the immediate environment of large towns, the Metropolis, and the new or comparatively new industrial aggregations. But there were difficult technical processes then in the matter of processing and packing the product for transport and subsequent display to the buyer. There was some criticism of the casual methods of growers: 'they let it grow'.

These things, hops, flax and fruit, were important in the national economy, but the most important productions were those of the systems of animal and crop husbandry, which were so closely interlocked in the major part of the country, although there was some emphasis upon sheep farming in the hills and more elevated land. The livestock, an integral part of the system of farming most generally practised in the country at that time, were famous in a worldwide sense. There were competitors for prize animals from a wide variety of overseas buyers in the USA, South Africa and Australia. An outstanding bull could be the foundation, not only of distinguished herds in foreign countries, but the fortune of the its breeder and owner. The breeders were not the most complaining of the farming fraternity — possibly they had no need to be! There was another element in the more stable condition of the cattle men — the increasing demand for liquid milk from the towns, although some of the farmers who gave evidence complained of the competition of dried and processed milk from overseas, South America in particular. But even the liquid milk trade came in for abuse. 'Milking instead of sheep farming', said one witness, 'will soon tell its own tale.' Pastures were nothing like so good as formerly, and the system of laying down was all wrong,

though a Somersetshire witness declared that the breeding of stock and the management of a good dairy were better than the fattening of cattle. Doubtless he was thinking of financial gains. Nevertheless, they all complained of low prices and minimal profits. Stores imported from Canada were finished in Scotland, but the farmers argued that their profits were too small, and that the milk trade was damaged by the introduction of separated milk from Ireland into the big cities like Glasgow.

Sheep were an important integer in the arable lands, and in the hills of southern England, those of Wales and the western counties and of the north, where they were the financial nexus upon which the sheep farmers lived and had their being. In 1905 there had been increases in the number of the flocks of some counties; decreases in others. In the arable counties the flock not only provided a saleable crop of wool, but an increase in the fertility in the land where they were folded. In the hills other considerations were taken into account: there was then, according to some witnesses, a taste for home-produced mutton on the tables of the well-to-do, and I have myself seen half a sheep being cooked upon a turnspit before an open fire; but the sheep had a trinity of value. In the arable lands it helped to keep the land friable and fertilized where the flock was folded, though apparently the value of the wool was, as with other things, rather depressed. The hill flocks were foundation stock in some sort, in addition to producing wool and mutton, but there was at this time an outcry that the flocks were reduced in numbers, and with the value of the fleece also falling the shepherds were hard put to it to maintain their standard of living, and indeed that of their flocks. There is no doubt, as the *Report* emphasizes, perhaps too heavily, that the farmers were facing new conditions to which they were not yet adapted.

This is virtually an analysis of a hard luck story, but new conditions were confronting the farmers, and new conditions always

provoke antagonism, possibly complaint from those who hate change. Some part of the complaints of the farmers who gave evidence may have sprung from a dislike of change with the adaptations it demands, but a good part may have been justified. The remedy for all distresses was put in a nutshell. It was an import duty of not less than 5 per cent coupled with a

reduction in the transport charges made by the railways, and some relief of taxation, both national and local. When have such things not been asked for by the generality of the population, let alone farmers? But it can be said that this *Report* supplies a conspectus of farming as it was in the United Kingdom of the early years of this century.

Table compiled from *Agricultural Statistics 1900-1904*

Acreage under crops	1900		1901		1902		1903		1904	
	England	Wales	England	Wales	England	Wales	England	Wales	England	Wales
	acres	acres	acres	acres	acres	acres	acres	acres	acres	acres
Wheat	1,744,556	51,654	1,617,721	47,019	1,630,892	48,328	1,497,254	43,197	1,302,404	35,144
Barley or Beet	1,645,022	105,048	1,635,426	101,907	1,578,977	101,326	1,545,354	99,080	1,543,579	96,341
Oats	1,860,513	216,447	1,831,740	208,773	1,892,717	210,153	1,953,866	213,266	2,959,983	212,240
Rye	46,102	43,951	49,649	1,460	61,241	1,341	52,460	1,380	49,453	1,228
Beans	248,828	1,288	237,361	1,215	228,548	1,285	226,750	1,292	249,245	1,235
Peas	154,295	1,542	152,185	1,596	176,827	1,426	179,458	1,059	173,793	917
Areas of green crops, potatoes and roots are supplied	2,442,377	112,490	2,401,265	110,479	2,423,784	110,118	2,338,099	108,272	2,310,018	107,421
<i>Animals</i>										
Horses total	1,152,321	153,284	1,161,914	154,624	1,155,361	154,114	1,179,360	157,264	1,195,942	169,262
Cows, heifers and other cattle Total	4,848,698	758,380	4,791,535	743,078	4,611,937	721,874	4,746,308	711,064	4,917,212	728,425
Ewes										
Total Sheep	15,844,743	3,432,516	15,548,057	3,427,734	15,034,479	3,462,698	14,900,978	3,511,424	14,748,962	3,489,685
Pigs Total	2,921,422	228,097	1,842,433	212,974	1,956,158	215,283	2,305,807	243,983	2,476,355	241,104