

Letters to the Editor

MR GOULD AND MR BERESFORD

SIR,—Mr Gould deserves your readers' gratitude for his stimulating critique of Mr Beresford's book on deserted villages. But I should like to mention some further points which may be worth considering.

Mr Gould's point that the prices of corn in the area serving London were relatively high in the late sixteenth century is a very good one. It certainly affects any index, such as Mr Bowden's, constructed from Thorold Rogers's figures. But Mr Kneisel has suggested that the "price leadership of London (the Lower Thames Area)" probably goes back to 1411 (*Journ. Econ. Hist.*, xiv, pp. 246 ff.). Unless Mr Gould can show that the differentials were greater in the late sixteenth century, it would seem better for the time being to rely on his arguments concerning the difficulty of transport. Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire were the subject of complaints about conversion from arable to pasture after 1550, although they were in the London market area.

Mr Gould's arguments, based on the rate of conversion at different periods calculated from the returns of the commissions of depopulation, lose their force now that Dr Kerridge has demonstrated how fallible a guide to actual conversion the returns are (*English Historical Review*, lxx, 1955, pp. 212 ff.). None the less we can say in a general way that conversion was still a problem at the end of the sixteenth century, though it attracted public attention in the 1590's partly because of a run of bad harvests.

All arguments, but especially those of Mr Beresford, based on Mr Bowden's index of wool prices, should be treated with great caution, since there are unfortunately strong reasons for thinking that it is not reliable as a measure of long-term changes. The reasons for this view are set out in a note by my colleague Mr J. F. Wright (*Yorkshire Bulletin of Economic and Social Research*, vii, pp. 156-8). Mr Bowden's index has some value as a local

index of the price of Durham wool, but even here its usefulness is limited by the fact that there are no quotations for that wool for the crucial years 1540-82. Thus Mr Gould's scepticism about Mr Beresford's deductions is amply justified. Mr Beresford's attempt to discover the incentives to enclosure in the Midlands by comparing metropolitan grain prices with an incomplete index of Durham wool prices has little to recommend it.

We still urgently need a full index of sixteenth-century wool prices. Ideally there should be several: one for each of the main wool-producing areas. For it may be that the demand for different types of wool varied during the century. For instance, did the growth of the new draperies increase the demand for Midland wool? Unwin tells us that the new draperies in Suffolk used long coarse wool. This is the type of wool that one might expect to be produced on the converted pastures of the Midlands. An index of meat prices would also be of great assistance, as would be some study of the relative profits to be made out of meat and wool at different periods in the history of Midland sheep-farming.

Yours truly,

J. P. COOPER

Trinity College,
Oxford.

BALKS IN OPEN FIELDS

SIR,—I write concerning Miss Beecham's 'Review of Balks as Strip Boundaries in the Open Fields' (*ante*, pp. 22-44) which refers to my 'Reconsideration of Some Former Husbandry Practices' (*ante*, III, 1955).

Miss Beecham's accusation (pp. 29, 35, 39) that I said balks were made in order to divide and bound the "strips" in all common fields throughout the Midland Plain is false. What I said (pp. 37-9) was, that even in the Midland Plain, as elsewhere, there were, in many of the common fields, but by no means in all, balks that divided and bounded the various

properties and occupations, and that, although there were some other reasons for these balks, not all of which could yet be determined, the division of dispersed parcels of land was one of their main objects. Her accusation (pp. 27-9) that I confusedly endowed the fixed mould-board plough with the properties of a one-way plough is also false. Her accusation that I denied the existence of ridges is likewise false. Her accusation that I was guilty of "land-strip identification" (pp. 26, 29) is equally false. In all these instances Miss Beecham does not contradict me, but only words that she puts into my mouth, and therefore a simple traverse is answer enough.

Miss Beecham also quarrels with my use of evidence. She attempts to debar all circumstantial evidence, even when used only in support of direct evidence, and to debar reasonable inference from the evidence. Not content with this, she would like to rule out evidence where the subject is not literally mentioned, but where there is merely a verbal difference. Furthermore, she would like to debar the general statement that comprehends the particular, merely because the particular is not literally included, and to debar the general even when used only to support particular evidence. For example, if when reading Venn's *Foundations of Agricultural Economics* Miss Beecham perused p. 32, she must have seen that I based myself on reasonable inference. Again, if it was generally forbidden to plough up greensward in the common fields, then balks of all sorts were included in this prohibition unless specifically exempted. Nevertheless, although Miss Beecham objects to reasonable inference, she herself places an unreasonable construction upon the deposition of William Harrowden (p. 36).

Lastly, Miss Beecham objects to an item of transcription, while herself mistranscribing "kare" for "eare" (p. 38); and makes a great show of not being able to trace some references, while she herself reproduces my references incorrectly (for example, p. 33, notes 2 and 5).

I have no wish to contradict Miss Beecham's argument, and to do so would be a work of supererogation, for it is self-contradictory, since in seeking to deny the existence of boundary balks, it brings forward additional evidence of their existence.

Yours faithfully,

ERIC KERRIDGE

University of Liverpool.

RIDGE AND FURROW

SIR,—Agriculturists will have followed with interest the lively discussions on the historical significance of ridge and furrow. Much, if not most, of the heavy clayland that was ploughed from old pasture in the war years in Warwickshire had been 'landed up' in ridge and furrow when previously in cultivation. When it was ploughed, lack of proper drainage and attacks from wireworm were the two most common causes of crop failure, but serious phosphate deficiency was also a cause of poor yields. The very fact that many fields were in deep ridge and furrow, however, created problems which had to be overcome when they were cultivated with modern farm machinery.

The first necessity, or so it seemed, was to get the fields as level as possible. This was done by opening up new furrows on the tops of the ridges and ploughing 'downhill', so filling the old furrows. This never levelled the field at the first ploughing, but it reduced the depth of the old furrows and the height of the ridges.

Levelling out in this manner created its own difficulties. The fertile top soil was ploughed off the crown of the ridge to fill the furrow and a band of lighter coloured subsoil denoted where the tops of the ridges had formerly been. Crops along these bands were poor, but cereals often 'lodged' or went flat in strips each side where the crop was growing in a good depth of fertile soil, some of which had been ploughed off the crowns of the ridges. There was also a physical as well as a chemical effect, as the bands of lighter coloured soil were sometimes found to be less amenable to cultivation than the remainder of

the field. With some years of rotational cropping these features of old ridge and furrow became less apparent, although the bands of light soil where the ridges had been can still be seen on many fields. Fertility tends to level up over the field as a whole, but the unkind physical nature of the raw subsoil persists.

Drainage was another problem that arose when the fields were levelled in the manner described above. Whatever the condition or extent of the underdrainage system, surface drainage on heavy clay fields is desirable if not essential. Water percolates but slowly through clay, and often heavy rain lies on the surface for some time. If a crop is on the ground the results of surface waterlogging can be serious. When a field is in ridge and furrow the surface water is led off along the bottom of the furrow and a channel should be made from it across the headland to the ditch.

In many cases to make cultivation easier with modern implements, but at the same time to give some degree of surface drainage, it has been found necessary in practice to land a field up again in wider ridges with furrows further apart. On the other hand, some farmers never threw down the old ridge completely for the above reasons. It is not uncommon still to find fields that are ploughed in two or even more different directions following the slope of the ground and the old ridge and furrow. This perhaps emphasizes the important part that the ancient practice played in providing surface drainage.

Yours, etc.

A. M. A. WOODS

WEALD CLAY HUSBANDRY

SIR,—As a farmer with an interest in farming history, may I welcome most heartily the bold and fascinating project of an Agrarian History of England following quickly on the birth of the Agricultural History Society and its excellent REVIEW? It is opportune, and there is some tidying up to be done after a generation of writers who, too often, were content to haver over the niceties of legal tenure, to copy the old myths, and to ignore the interesting

problems of how the wheels went round. They and some of their successors seem to forget that our forefathers, given a chance, were sensible men provident in their husbandry; they had to be, or starve.

Today, judging by our REVIEW, things have changed very much for the better; but has not the glorification of the trivial been transferred from legal tenure to ploughmanship, and are we not in danger of creating more myths and mountainous barks by academic hair-splitting on this subject, for our unfortunate successors to clear away before they can start on any useful work? Further, have not too many earlier hack writers, cranks, and failed farmers been swallowed whole and endlessly copied, while a great deal of original material awaits critical analysis?

Having fired that broadside, I propose to increase the mountain by a few inches. This Weald Clay district was, apart from a small percentage of common waste and an occasional hunting park, enclosed by its earliest settlers nibbling their way into the forest field by tiny field. Field shape here was determined by the lie of the land, the numerous small streams, and the need to facilitate drainage and prevent erosion. Strange ploughing practices or covered-wagon-sized plough-teams probably played no part. If an aerial photograph could have been made of the district only forty-two years ago it would have shown very clearly some thousands of acres of ridge and furrow. The fields simply tumbled down to bad pasture, untouched and unlevelled, in ridges usually a rod wide, some a foot or so high and rounded, some flat, depending, like much else in husbandry, on the individual farmer's whim, the season, and the needs of individual fields. There is no mystery, no obscure interest, only the wise universal practice of local heavy-land husbandry, just that and nothing more. Probably practised during the preceding thousand years as the Weald Clay was gradually cleared, it was simply the best way to get results on this difficult but not unproductive land with very limited equipment and thus precariously few

days for the yearly round of cultivations. The practice of ridge and furrow, here 'land' and 'vor', most certainly did not go out with the advent of tile draining. Here tiles were something of a luxury to tidy up springy spots, and to supplement, not replace, the landing up.

All of which, to an amateur, seems to emphasize the difficulty of writing about the husbandry side of agrarian history except on a regional basis.

Yours truly,
G. H. KENYON

Kirdford,
W. Sussex.

THE RABBIT IN ENGLAND

SIR,—Your correspondent Mr Ridler may be interested in the article by Colin Matheson on 'The Rabbit and the Hare in Wales' in *Antiquity*, xv, 1941, p. 371. The author says however that there is "no satisfactory evidence" of the rabbit's existence in England before the thirteenth century, the oldest written reference known to him being a deed among the Exeter city muniments, undated but before 1234. The charter of 1176 is presumably a recent discovery?

Yours faithfully,
A. E. B. OWEN

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Hampstead, London, N.W.3

[The charter of 1176 was printed in the *English Historical Review*, LXII, 1947, p. 365.—ED.]

NATIONAL NATURE RESERVES

SIR,—At the suggestion of Mr E. M. Nicholson, the Director-General of the Nature Conservancy, I am writing to ask if any members of your Society would like to collaborate in the study of prehistoric farm sites on National Nature Reserves.

The Nature Conservancy is not officially concerned with archaeology, and the National Nature Reserves are selected as being of great biological interest. Yet it so happens that some Nature Reserves, especially those on the chalk in the south of England, have great archaeological interest in showing the pattern of former settlement and cultivation. For example, the Nature Reserve at Lullington near Eastbourne is covered with a pattern of Celtic fields and is illustrated under the name Fore Down, Lullington, on page 212 of *The Archaeology of Sussex* by E. C. Curwen. The Kingley Vale Nature Reserve near Chichester, preserved on account of the fine old yew trees, comprises a farm site, probably of the Late Bronze Age, where a perforated vessel which may have been used in cheese-making was found. The Reserve on Fyfield Down in Wiltshire shows terracing for cultivation with Sarsen stones in places arranged to hold up the soil. On nearby Overton Down air photographs have shown the 'lands' of ancient ploughing (Crawford and Keiller, *Wessex from the Air*, p. 124).

It seems probable that the present vegetation on many of the Downs may be explained by their cultivation in the past, and that the study of the differences, both in plants and in soils, must not neglect the past agricultural history of the areas. There should be a fruitful field for collaboration between the archaeologist, the agricultural historian, the botanist, and the soil chemist.

Yours faithfully,
A. S. THOMAS

The Nature Conservancy,
19 Belgrave Square,
London, S.W.1.

[It is suggested that anybody interested in Dr Thomas's project should write in the first instance to the Secretary of the British Agricultural History Society.—ED.]