

# RURAL HISTORY TODAY

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## Hatching a business

Situated 38 miles from London, the market town of Aylesbury was once famed worldwide for its eponymous white duck, writes Linda Henderson.

As 'an Aylesbury Duck could only come from Aylesbury', eggs for incubation were sent to all parts of the British Empire and beyond. In 1874, local historian and duck breeder J K Fowler had proudly written about the ability of the Aylesbury Duck to adapt 'to almost every climate and soil ... thriving anywhere and everywhere, from the burning tropical sun of Australia to the icy coldness of the Canadian fall'.<sup>1</sup> Although the industry was credited with mitigating the worst effects of the late nineteenth-century agricultural depression in Buckinghamshire, it has generally been overlooked by historians.

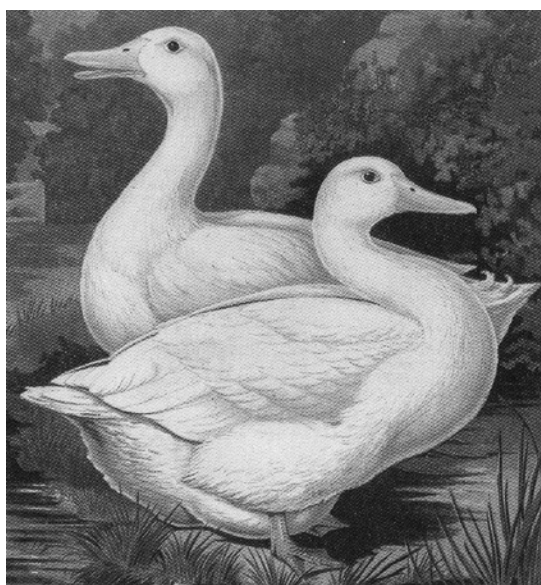
### Luxury product

Aylesbury ducklings were a luxury food to be conspicuously consumed in the hotels of London; they were considered a society 'essential' for Ascot Week. As Aylesbury ducks were early layers with prodigious appetites, they could be produced within 8 to 10 weeks to coincide with a gap in the game market between Christmas and June.

Restriction of supply, rather than product quality, was essential in maintaining its status as a luxury item. The mode of production, with its divisions between the stock duck owners who provided the eggs and the fatteners or "duckers" who raised the ducklings, spread the financial risks, with duckers contracting with the stock duck owners for guaranteed fertility of eggs.

*Probably, there may be some who prefer the ducklings when the season is more advanced; but, whilst the flavour may be fuller, and the meat more abundant, these are considerations which do not meet with any regard, for the dictates of fashion and taste are infinitely more powerful than those of economics and of facts. But we regard the matter with great equanimity, for this demand gives employment to a large number of men and women in the Vale of Aylesbury and does much to lift them far above the ordinary run of country cottagers. (The Pall Mall Gazette, 14 May 1889)*

In the eighteenth century, Pococke noted that the poor people of Aylesbury were supplementing their



Two prize-winning Aylesbury ducks, bred by Mrs Mary Simmons of Hartwell. *The Illustrated Book of Poultry*, 1873.

income by the breeding of ducklings for the London markets. No mention was made at this point of the ducks being white, but the trade was regular as 'four carts go with them every Satui'day to London'.<sup>2</sup> When the industry moved from Aylesbury into the surrounding villages, the domestic production method persisted. At its peak in 1894, 38 tons of dead ducks were being sent by train to the London poultry markets of Smithfield and Leadenhall, with many more being transported by road.

### Production by the poor

The contrast between production and consumption was stark. Ducklings were intensively raised in the cottages of the very poor in Aylesbury and the surrounding villages. The task predominately fell to women, as it was an occupation that could be undertaken alongside straw-plaiting and lacemaking.

The cottagers or farmers who kept stock ducks for egg production were distinct from the "duckers"

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Image above:  
Cattle plague memorial – see page 5



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Killing, picking and packing of Aylesbury Ducks at Askett Duck Farm, Courtesy of The National Archives. © SG Payne and Son, Aylesbury

or fatteners. The eggs were hatched under hens with an incubation period of 28 days, with the eggs being sprinkled daily with lukewarm water. Ducks and sitting hens were kept in bedrooms, sitting-rooms, parlours, cupboards and outhouses, with an average ducker producing 400 ducklings per year.

Once hatched the ducklings were fed a high-protein diet of hard-boiled eggs, boiled rice and bullocks' liver for 2 weeks, then progressed to barley-meal and tallow greaves (the solids that remained after rendering of animal fats) which could be obtained locally from the candle factory in Silver Lane, Aylesbury. Some fatteners also fed the ducklings horseflesh, bran, buttermilk, toast soaked in water, potatoes, and boiled stinging-nettles to 'cool the blood' and prevent the onset of rickets or "giddy-duck". In the later nineteenth century, scrap biscuits from the Huntley and Palmers factory at Reading provided a cheap source of food with a high sugar and chocolate content. The ducklings were fed up to four times a day, and when raising large numbers this was an intensive and arduous task. Their ability to put on weight quickly without cramming, meant that they could be ready for market between 8 and 10 weeks old and weighing between 4 and 6 pounds.

Whilst the ducklings were restricted indoors the stock ducks were encouraged to have access to water, as 'liberty produced stronger progeny'. It was this dual system that enabled 'many to undertake the rearing of ducks who would not otherwise be able to do so'.<sup>3</sup> Stock ducks would gather on communal ponds in a system analogous to that of common grazing grounds. If no pond was available, holes were made in the roads to form puddles for the ducks to splash in. Each set of ducks was identified by an application of coloured paint to the neck, body, or wings or by the women clipping the feathers into unique patterns.

## Women in the industry

Mrs Elizabeth Bowden ran her own business as a duck breeder in Oxford Road, Aylesbury employing the son of her next-door neighbour as a duck feeder. Her premises were singled out for attention by the Superintending Inspector for the Board of Health during the cholera



Typical 'Duckers' cottage in Spring Gardens, Aylesbury, 1849, courtesy of Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies

outbreak of 1832 where it was observed that 'sewerage from the duck-ponds in the back-yard passes under the brick floor of the living room, the soil oozing up between the bricks'.<sup>4</sup>

In the village of Weston Turville, Eliza Ingram bred ducks and other poultry as well as running the local pub. Similarly, Isabella Eldridge was listed as a duck-breeder in *Kelly's Directories* until 1915, making enough profit to own her own home and two others in the village.

Larger commercial duck farms offered vital employment opportunities for women. Fanny Poulton who worked at Askett Duck Farm was a skilled worker, winning first prize in the 'Duck Plucking competition' at the local horticultural society annual shows in 1903 and 1904.

Women were also at the forefront of dealing at Leadenhall Market in London, usually trading under their husband's name, even if widowed. In 1895 Elizabeth Maria Goodwin entered into a tenancy agreement as a poultry salesman, under the trading name of James Goodwin & Co where each section of the agreement referring to 'salesman' was carefully crossed through and replaced with the words 'widow - sales'.

However, by 1919, amid anxieties of women neglecting their duties as wives and mothers, official reports chose to emphasise how duck breeding and fattening had been detrimental to the physical and mental health of the women involved rather than acknowledging their economic contribution.

► Linda Henderson's PhD study has been funded by the ESRC, University of Exeter and Buckinghamshire Record Society.  
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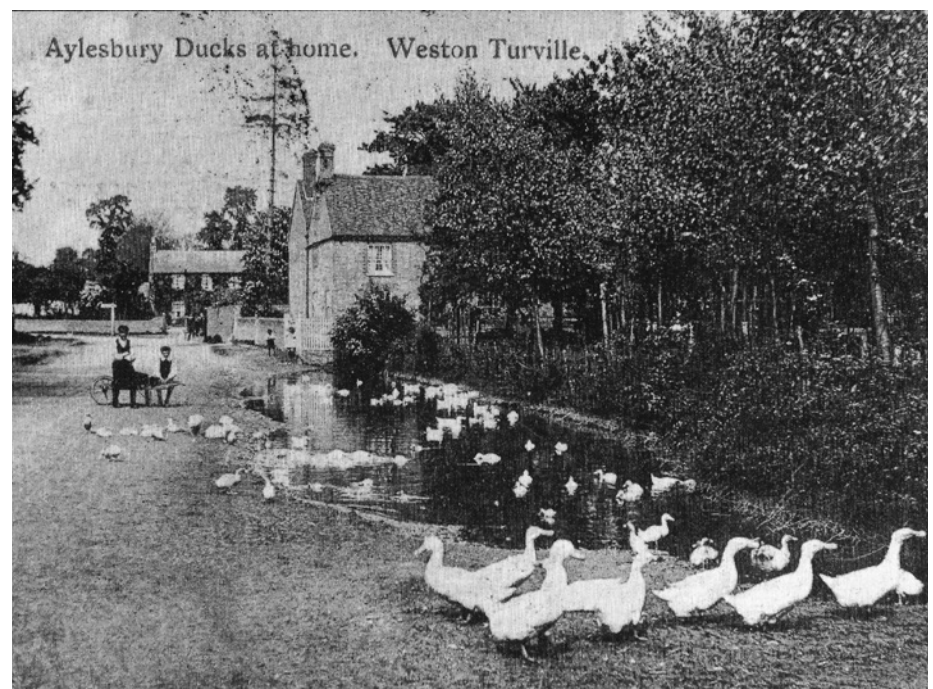
Interior of the Duck Picking Shed at Askett Duck Farm. Courtesy of The National Archives © SG Payne and Son, Aylesbury.

‘The work of rearing and fattening is mostly done by the women-folk, and it involves much lifting of heavy weights all day long and is very hard and anxious work of a highly skilled and technical nature’<sup>5</sup>

- 1 J K Fowler, ‘Aylesbury Ducks’ in *The Fanciers Journal and Poultry Exchange*, 1874, p. 162
- 2 *The travels through England of Dr. Richard Pococke, successively bishop of Meath and of Ossory, during 1750, 1751, and later years*, ed. by James Joel Cartwright, 2 vols. (London: Camden Society, 1888–1889), I, (1888), p. 164.
- 3 ‘Ducks and Duck-Breeding’, *Board of Agriculture and Fisheries, Leaflet no 167*. (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1907), p.6
- 4 William Ranger, *Report to the General Board of Health on a Preliminary Inquiry into the Sewerage, Drainage, and Supply of Water, and the Sanitary Conditions of the Inhabitants of the Town of Aylesbury*, (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1849), p.6.
- 5 BPP, 1919, Board of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Wages and Conditions of Employment in Agriculture*, Vol II, Reports of Investigators, p.23.

The most remarkable instance of poultry farming in the district is the duck rearing and fattening industry which is carried on near Aylesbury and in most of the surrounding villages... Duck fattening has long been carried on in the district, and I was generally informed, and I have no doubt that it is true, that it has, on the whole, increased in recent years. At Haddenham it was said “Everybody seems to go in for it. Many farmers have taken to it on account of the bad times.”

BPP, 1895, XVI, RC on the Agricultural Depression, Report by Aubrey Spencer on the Vale of Aylesbury and County of Hertford, pp. 12–21



Aylesbury ducks at home, Weston Turville. A 1900 postcard.

## Society news

**We hope that all our members and supporters are keeping well in these troubled and trying times.**

Like many other societies we have little to guide us at a moment of global pandemic. Members will be aware that the Spring Conference had to be cancelled and so no AGM could take place. The Society’s Executive Committee considered various options for holding an AGM in 2020 but decided that it was best to defer it to the next Spring Conference. It also agreed that the members of the EC who would have stood down at the AGM should be rolled forwards to the 2021 AGM.

There have been some significant changes in the Society’s officers though. Dr Bill Shannon, in line with long held plans, has stood down as Treasurer and has been succeeded (to the next AGM) by Mr Derek Shepherd. Dr Sarah Holland has also stood down as secretary and Professor Richard Hoyle is standing in her place for the time being.

We are planning a Winter Conference (which will be on

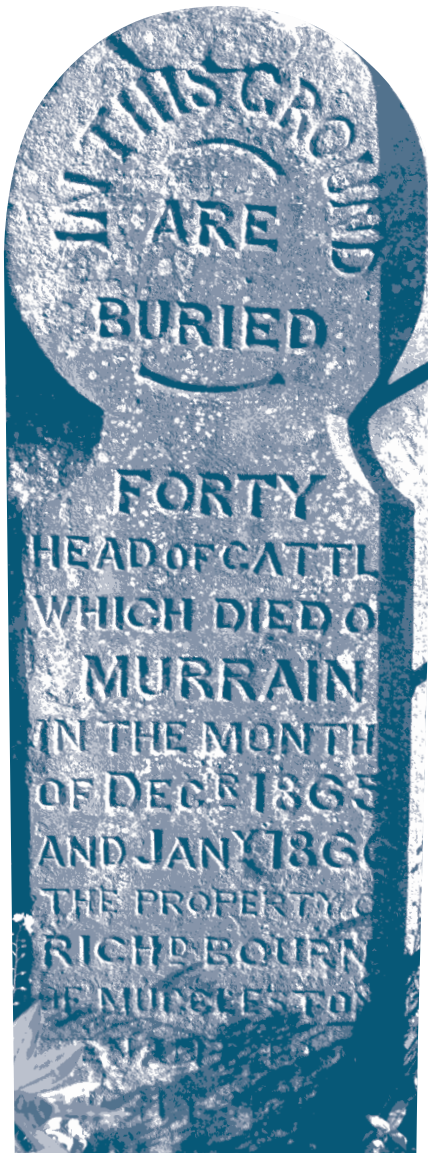
‘Neighbourliness in Farming’), but whether this is on the model of usual conferences and is also webcast or whether it is entirely webcast remains to be seen.

We hope that by next April order and a semblance of normality will be restored, and we can all meet at the Spring Conference at Denham College near Abingdon on 12–14 April.

Other areas of the Society’s work continue unabated... the Review, LIBRAL and of course Rural History Today. We have also been making alterations to the web site ([www.bahs.org.uk](http://www.bahs.org.uk)), and it is there that you can find more about how the Society is coping with lockdown. We hope that by the time you read this, the worst of it will be behind us.

*Richard Hoyle, Acting Secretary*

# Commemorating cattle



Unable to travel far during lockdown, James Bowen explored the area close to his home in Market Drayton and discovered intriguing memorials to livestock lost during the 1865–7 cattle plague.

*All the stones were photographed by the author*

Market Drayton is in north Shropshire and well known for dairying and livestock rearing. Between 1865–7, farms here and in neighbouring Cheshire and Staffordshire were devastated by an epidemic of cattle plague (also known as rinderpest or steppe murrain) which was so bad that it led the government to establish the State Veterinary Department.

On 7 August 1865 *The Manchester Guardian* quoted Professor John Gamgee (1831–1894), a notable British veterinarian who specialised in contagious diseases of cattle and horses: 'From Market Drayton... we learn that on one farm 33 out of 35 heads of cattle have died, and there are reasonable grounds for fearing further losses in the same neighbourhood.'

The following week (14 August) it was reported by the same newspaper that the Market Drayton Agricultural Society had issued a circular describing the symptoms of the disease and the measures required to prevent its spread. The press reported that the main way the disease spread was by the trading of cattle between dairymen and farmers. Herds were not self-contained as many are today. In October 1965, the *Shropshire Star* marked the centenary of the outbreak by printing photographs of four stones commemorating the loss of entire herds. Armed with this information, I set off to locate them.

► One wonders how typical the examples identified are, and if there are similar memorials elsewhere in the country to the 1865–7 cattle plague or FMD outbreaks? If you know of any other memorials please contact me: [J.Bowen@leedstrinity.ac.uk](mailto:J.Bowen@leedstrinity.ac.uk). Indeed, if relatively few survive there may be a case for them to be listed or recorded on local Historic Environment Records so their existence is known.

## Norton Farm, Norton-in-Hales, Shropshire

This simple, sandstone memorial is known locally as the murrain stone. It measures approximately 40 (width) x 76 (height) x 30 (depth) cms, and sits to the south of the village, in the corner of a horse paddock near Norton Farm. The inscription, which is worn, reads: 'This stone is raised as a memento of the great cattle plague of 1866 which swept 54 head off this farm in 14 days in March. They died without remedy and here lie'. Earlier photographs show that this is followed by a Biblical verse: 'Shall we receive good from God and not evil. Job 2. 10.' It is the only memorial located with a religious reference.



Norton Farm



## Rectory Farm, Mucklestone, Staffordshire

This is an elaborate memorial, resembling a Victorian style gravestone, which is now in the garden having been moved to allow for the construction of new farm buildings. It measures approximately 30 (width) x 84 (height) x 18 (depth) cms. The inscription reads: 'In this ground are buried forty head of cattle which died of murrain in the months of December 1865 and January 1866, the property of Richard Bourne, Mucklestone.' Bourne was a tenant of the Right Honourable Hungerford Lord Crewe, but the farm was later bought by his family who still own it.



Rectory Farm

## Lower Farm, Bearstone, Staffordshire

This memorial in the farmhouse garden measures approximately 45 (width) x 107 (height) x 14 (depth) cms. It was originally at Bearstone Grange but has been moved on several occasions. Again, this is much larger than the memorial at Norton-in-Hales and, like the one at Rectory Farm, is more akin to a gravestone. The inscription reads: 'This stone erected as a memento of the great cattle plague. 62 head were swept off this farm during the winter of 1865 & 66 and are here buried. The



Lower Farm

property of Daniel Eardley of Bearstone, tenant to Mrs Kinnersly.' The current owner of the farm, who keeps a large dairy herd, said that Daniel Eardley named on the memorial was his great-great-grandfather.

## Willoughbridge Lodge, Mucklestone parish, Staffordshire

The memorial at this farmhouse (a former hunting lodge) takes the form of an engraved stone built into the exterior of a gabled wing. It measures approximately 60 (width) x 42 (height) cms. The inscription reads: 'This stone is engraved as a memento of the great cattle plague of 1866. On this farm are buried 60 head which died [the stone is worn] February.' This was a comparatively large herd. Animals were slaughtered in order to reduce the spread of the plague.



Willoughbridge Lodge

## Moston, Cheshire

Recently a veterinarian from the Nantwich Farm Vets posted online a photograph of another cattle plague memorial:

[www.thatsfarming.com/news/vet-stumbles-across-ancient-cattle-memorial-stone](http://www.thatsfarming.com/news/vet-stumbles-across-ancient-cattle-memorial-stone)

It is inscribed: 'Near the place were buried 43 cows, 7 calving heifers, 5 yearling heifers, 1 bull, 20 calves that died in the months of February and March 1866 of the rinderpest then raging in Cheshire belonging to John Sutton of Moston Manor.' I have yet to investigate this site.

## A sense of loss

Clearly the decision of farmers to commemorate their livestock reflects not simply the scale of losses, but the close emotional and working relationship which farmers and the wider farming community had with their animals. The memorials preserved the memory of the animals and the dramatic impact the cattle plague had on the farms affected. The numbers given on the inscriptions suggest that all the animals in the herds mentioned would have been lost. A special rate was levied to compensate farmers for losses. Memorials are more likely to have been erected by the larger farmers.

Shropshire Archives holds numerous assessment books, as well as detailed accounts of the cattle plague at particular farms. Just as today when animals and whole herds have to be slaughtered due to Bovine Tuberculosis or Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) outbreaks, farmers must have suffered stress and a profound sense of loss.

Although the last incidence of rinderpest in Britain was in 1877 and it was eradicated worldwide in 2011, farmers still appreciate the significance of these memorials, particularly if they recall contemporary outbreaks of FMD. The subject of cattle plague memorials is not only relevant to agricultural, rural, local, landscape and veterinary historians, but also to interdisciplinary researchers interested in animal studies and human-animal studies. These stones illustrate the historically close relationship between farmers and their livestock.

# Remembering Elizabeth Griffiths | 1948–2020

Image: Peter Griffiths



It was very sad to hear that Elizabeth Griffiths, known as Lizzie to her friends, died as a result of a brain tumour in April this year, writes *Susanna Wade Martins*, in a personal tribute to her life. She was known to many members of the BAHS as a regular and active attendee at winter and spring conferences and was a member of the Executive Committee from 2006 to 2013. She could always be relied upon to write lively articles for *Rural History Today* which as then editor, I was always glad to receive.

## Norfolk passions

Contributions to *The Review* (vols 46 and 63) covered research into two of her Norfolk passions, the Blickling and Le Strange estates, while her contribution to *Essays* for Joan Thirsk (*Peoples, Landscapes and Alternative Agriculture*, AHR supplement series 3) included a third estate, Felbrigg, in which she was deeply interested and which, along with Blickling, was the subject of her PhD (completed in 1987). Using material from these three well-documented estates she was able to reconstruct in a unique way their farming and finances in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and this formed the basis of much of her published work. This led to her working with Jane Whittle in Exeter on an ESRC and AHRC-funded project on the housewife in early modern rural England using the detailed account books of Alice Le Strange. There followed the publication by the Norfolk Record Society of Alice's farming and family records 1617–1656 (*Her Price is above Pearls* 2015) and their jointly-written book *Consumption and Gender in the Early Seventeenth-Century Household: The World*

*of Alice Le Strange*, OUP 2019). At the time of her death she was working on a third book, *Managing for Posterity: The Le Stranges at Hunstanton and their estates 1604–1724* for the *Hertfordshire University Press* series, *Studies in Regional and Local History*.

## Insights and influences

Although born in Singapore and spending her early years in the Far East, she was always a Norfolk girl at heart, as her parents had moved there when Malaya [now Malaysia] was granted independence. But she had two other spells away from the county, both of which were to influence her work. She spent several years farming in New Zealand, before returning to Norfolk to study for an undergraduate history degree as a mature student, gaining first class honours and then writing her thesis under the supervision of Jim Holderness. Her time away gave her direct experience of farming, as well as an understanding of the share farming system as commonly practiced there. It led to a new line of enquiry, studying a topic hardly ever considered before by British agricultural historians and pursued with Mark Overton at Exeter with an ESRC grant from 2005–2007. This resulted in a joint publication, *Farming to halves; the hidden history of share farming in England from medieval to modern times* (2009).

Secondly, when she moved with her husband Peter to Kent, her friendship with Joan Thirsk was an important influence. By this time Lizzie was pursuing a very successful teaching career, but Joan urged her not to abandon her academic interests and it was with Joan's encouragement that she continued her research. When Peter took up the appointment of Regional Director for the National Trust in the East of England in 2002, she gave up her post as head of history at Reigate College and they moved back to Norfolk. When Lizzie moved away from Kent, she saw less of Joan but they continued a lively correspondence and Lizzie kept all Joan's letters. In 2002 Joan came to Norfolk for the launch of *William Windham's Green Book* published by the Norfolk Record Society and held in the kitchen of his home at Felbrigg Hall. By this time Joan was working on food history and commented at the

beginning of her introduction how comfortable she was giving a talk in a kitchen. She only wished there were 'spits, pans and bowls so that she could cook up some snacks'. Joan Thirsk also realised the importance of Lizzie's work, commenting in 2004, 'You have such insights into their (the Hobarts and Windhams) strategies for managing their farms; it seems to me that you are the pioneer in this field of understanding and I hope you will be recognized for your originality'. It was these insights into the lives of 16th and 17th-century Norfolk gentry through her unparalleled knowledge of their archives which make her work so important, proving, as it did, that agricultural innovation in Norfolk at least can be traced well back to the 16th century on these gentry estates. But more than this, she developed a strong empathy with the families she studied. She talked of Alice (Le Strange) as if she knew her as a friend.

## Energy and enthusiasm

An early project had been as a co-author with Professor Hassell Smith of a book on the history of the Norwich Freeman (*Buxom to the Mayor*, 1987). To celebrate the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first entry by a Freeman in the Old Free Book, in 2017 Lizzie was asked to update her earlier book and to prepare the Freeman's registers for putting online. She withdrew from the project due to ill health in August last year.

Lizzie's deep intellectual curiosity, energy and ability to enthuse others contributed to her success as a teacher and made for inspiring lectures and a lively writing style. Behind the gentle façade she was at times a risk-taker as was shown when she resigned her teaching post, committing herself to work with Jane Whittle before it was certain that the research grant would be confirmed and the project go ahead. She was also a perfectionist with a will of iron, which stood her in good stead both at work and in her other pursuits. She had many interests outside her work, creating a wonderful home and immaculate garden at Little Ellingham. She loved walking with Peter and their succession of Jack Russell Terriers, and was an enthusiastic bridge player, taking her game seriously and always liking to win!



# The grassland revolution

by John Martin and Paul Merchant

Since the Second World War grassland husbandry has experienced revolutionary changes. These include an unprecedented increase in the popularity of ley farming (the alternate growing of grass followed by a period of arable cropping), the continuation of wartime ploughing-up of permanent pasture, and the development and widespread use of more productive strains of grasses and clovers, coupled with increased use of artificial fertilisers. Such developments have merited scant attention – rather surprising given that grassland was, and has continued to be, a very important form of agricultural land use in Britain.

## Inter-war surveys

The pioneering apologist of this grassland revolution was scientist and polymath Sir George Stapledon, FRS. Stapledon was Director of the Welsh Plant Breeding Station [WPBS], near Aberystwyth, between 1919 and 1942, where he and his colleagues selected and bred grasses and clovers – designated ‘S’ varieties – that outperformed (in terms of growth rate, digestibility and nutrition) the dubious commercial strains which were commonly available in the 1930s. Working under Stapledon at the WPBS, William Davies conducted detailed grassland surveys of Wales (1936–1938) and England (1938–1939) revealing that what was designated ‘first and second grade’ grassland (grassland containing 30% or more, and 20–30% perennial ryegrass (*Lolium perenne*) respectively) was limited to a number of specific areas [see map]. Over half of English and Welsh grass was deemed fourth rate – dominated by bent (*Agrostis*) and other low yielding grasses such as meadow fescue (*Festuca pratensis*) and foxtail (*Alopecurus*) – not suitable for the fattening of lambs or cattle, or for supplying the nutritional needs of dairy cows without the excessive feeding of concentrates.

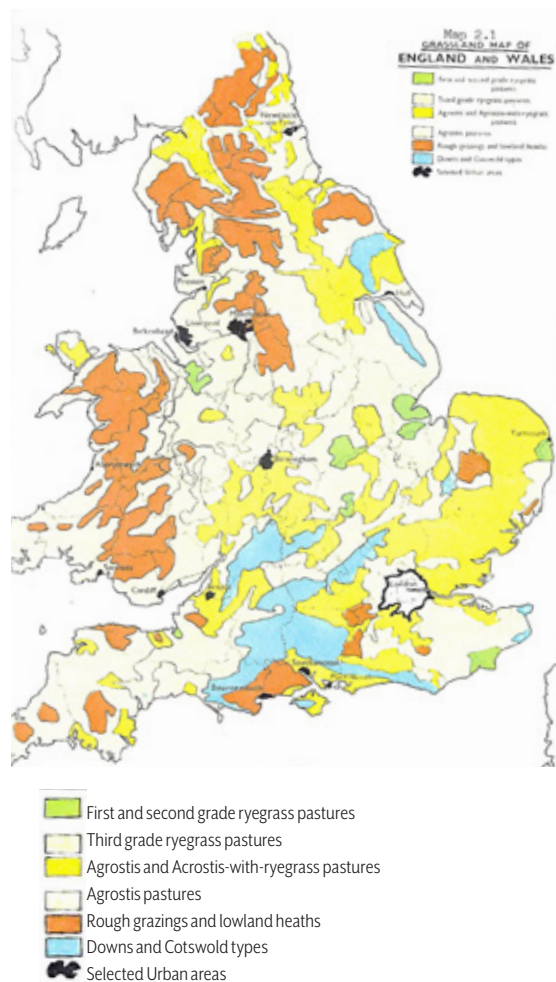
## Ploughing up pasture

Stapledon and Davies’ revelations about the poor quality of English and Welsh grassland helped to legitimize the ploughing-up campaign in the Second World War (which reduced the area of permanent pasture by 5 million acres between 1939 and 1944) and the establishment of a Grassland Improvement Station in 1940, directed by Stapledon (this moved from Drayton to Hurley in 1949 and was renamed the Grassland Research Institute). It also stimulated the formation of the British Grassland Society in 1945 (Stapledon and Davies were founding members) for the promotion of informed grassland management through talks, demonstrations and competitions.<sup>1</sup>

All was set for the grassland revolution to gain momentum; prefacing the second edition of *Ley Farming* in 1948, Stapledon makes his view clear that a wartime practice of ploughing-up pastures for re-seeding with the new ‘S’ varieties should continue apace: ‘despite the progress made during the war years, we still have a very long way to go in our attack on permanent grass’.

## Oral histories

For a sense of how the Stapledon-inspired grassland revolution played out on the ground in the decades after World War Two, it is instructive to listen to farmers



Grassland map of England and Wales, taken from *Ley Farming*, p.183.

and scientists recorded recently by *National Life Stories* at the British Library. These recordings contain details of motivation and practice not captured in other sources. In his interview, Poul Christensen explains that, starting in 1947, his father Arnold helped to transform the Buckhurst Estate in Sussex, in part by taking a modern approach to grass, developed through service in the British Grassland Society and close relations with the local National Agricultural Advisory Service [NAAS] officer. Innovative tendencies (‘my father was very keen on adopting new things’) found expression in more intensive grassland farming, based on ‘S’ varieties planted on reclaimed scrubland:

‘There were S24, S23, S22 [...] they’re all ryegrass [...] and we were laying those [...] down, but it did require fertilizing [...] so I have memories of unloading off a train in the village bags of [...] sulphate of ammonia [...] There were two very big fields that [...] were reclaimed. And he received a lot of accolades for doing that [...] from his fellow farmers, from the government, from the press’.<sup>2</sup>

On his own dairy farm, which he took on in 1968, Poul followed his father’s example, using fertilized S22, S23 and entering and winning competitions of the county branch

Continued from page 7



Manual of British Grasses, 1907

#### Rural History Today

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Articles for the next issue should be sent by 3 December 2020 to Dr Rebecca Ford: [rebecca.ford@btinternet.com](mailto:rebecca.ford@btinternet.com)

Membership of the BAHS is open to all who support its aim of promoting the study of agricultural history and the history of rural economy and society. Details of membership are available on the website: [www.bahs.org.uk/membership.html](http://www.bahs.org.uk/membership.html)

Enquiries about other aspects of the Society's work should be directed to the Acting Secretary, Professor Richard Hoyle. [r.w.hoyle@reading.ac.uk](mailto:r.w.hoyle@reading.ac.uk)

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of the British Grassland Society, which he remembers as 'a really major force [...] in terms of improving grassland management' [...] at the time'.<sup>3</sup>

While Arnold Christensen was transforming the Buckhurst Estate 'into something that was beyond the ordinary', John Conant was acting similarly as the new tenant, from 1949, of Old Hall Farm, on the Lyndon Hall Estate, Rutland. While his neighbours were inclined to continue to graze their livestock on permanent pastures, he was an 'avid searcher after advice' from NAAS and ICI, 'a very keen farmer', determined to plough up old grass for cereals and modern grasses, including S23:

*'[There] was a very big field which the previous tenant highly prized for the grass in it, permanent pasture, which was in the valley and thought to be very good grass. In actual fact, it wasn't really very productive and we could make it much more productive by ploughing it up and planting modern grasses'.*<sup>4</sup>

Conant uses the term productive here as it would have been understood at the time – productive of nutrition for animals, rather than, say, productive of biodiversity. It is in this spirit that he says local farmers 'worshipped permanent grass, they thought it was sacred' in contrast to his view that replacement with new 'S' varieties ('pretty well ryegrass') was the way forward: 'You could apply fertilisers which would be worthwhile because the grass would respond to that and therefore you would get much more growth and there was [...] much more nutrition in the grass for the animals than you'd ever get out of permanent grass'.<sup>5</sup> By 1958, John Conant's farm was appearing in local and national publications as an ICI 'demonstration farm' celebrated in part for its new temporary grasses.

The pioneering grassland farming described here was actively developed and promoted by the agricultural science of the day. At Newcastle University's Cockle Park Experimental Station in the early 1960s, David Morris' PhD explored the response of temporary grass to different husbandry regimes – with findings appearing in Grassland Society publications – against a background of the winding down of research at Cockle Park on permanent grass which he regarded as 'well past

its sell-by date'.<sup>6</sup> He returned to Cockle Park as assistant director in the later 1960s after a period of work for ICI including 'quite a few trials of spraying off [with herbicides] the native pasture on hills and seeding it with grass' which 'worked very well indeed'.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile at the Grassland Research Institute in Hurley, scientists including interviewee Nigel Young focused exclusively on temporary, sown grasses. It was not until later in his career that Young remembers the tide of scientific enthusiasm for temporary grass turning – in part because of a more widespread recognition of the environmental value of longstanding pastures – prompting the establishment of a new research site on permanent grassland, North Wyke in Devon, in 1981.<sup>8</sup>

After the Second World War there was a revolution in grassland husbandry comparable with, if not greater than, that which took place in arable farming. As in the arable case, it was based on the development and widespread use of more productive strains of plants which transformed farming and the appearance of the countryside; the multitude of grasses and other plants which characterized meadows prior to the war have virtually disappeared. The British Library's 'An oral history of farming, land management and conservation in post-war Britain', funded by Arcadia, provides an unique insight into this largely undocumented aspect of post-war agrarian development.

- 1 Powell, R.A., Corral, A.J. and Corral, Rosemary. G. 1995 A History of the British Grassland Society, 1945-1995 in Pollott G.E. (ed.) *Grassland into the 21st Century*. British Grassland Society Occasional Symposium No. 29, pp. 2-30.
- 2 Poul Christensen interviewed in 2019, British Library catalogue reference: C1828/08, Track 1.
- 3 C1828/08, Track 6
- 4 John Conant interviewed in 2019, British Library catalogue reference: C1828/10, Track 4.
- 5 C1828/10, Track 6
- 6 David Morris interviewed in 2019, British Library catalogue reference: C1828/11, Track 9.
- 7 C1828/11, Track 5.
- 8 Nigel Young interviewed in 2019 and 2020, British Library catalogue reference: C1828/12.

## The British Grassland Society

**The British Grassland Society was formed in 1945 by a committee of twenty grassland scientists led by George Stapledon and William Davies.**

The aims of the Society were to provide opportunities for grassland researchers to meet and exchange information, and to translate research findings into improved grassland management by farmers. These aims were pursued through the *Journal of the British Grassland Society* (renamed *Grass and Forage Science* in 1979), summer and winter meetings involving farm visits held in locations across the British Isles, the establishment (from 1954) of a network of local grassland societies, publication of a practical magazine (variously named *Herbiuaria*,

*Grass Today* and now *Grass and Forage Manager*) and – from 1979 – grassland management competitions. The competitions, which were organised locally and nationally, included the National Silage Competition (sponsored for many years by fertiliser companies) and the Grassland Farmer of the Year Competition, which is still running.

#### Sources

RA Powell, AJ Corral and RG Corral 1995 A History of the British Grassland Society, 1945-1995 in GE Pollott (ed.) *Grassland into the 21st Century* BGS Occasional Symposium 29, pp.2-30  
[www.britishgrassland.com](http://www.britishgrassland.com)