

RURAL HISTORY TODAY

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Image above: Newstead Abbey
Cloister. Photo: Tony Grist.

Letters from Frating Hall Farm

by Ken Worpole



A young Martyn Thomas watches corn being loaded into the threshing machine at Frating Hall Farm, c.1950.
Photo by kind permission of Martyn Thomas.

In the Autumn of 1950, a young Cambridge graduate, Helen Johnson, went to work as a volunteer at Frating Hall Farm in Essex, a long-established farm close to Wivenhoe on the River Colne. It had been acquired by a group of Christian pacifists in 1943 in order to establish a communal settlement, reviving the age-old dream of turning swords into ploughshares. While there she wrote a series of long letters to her fiancée, Arthur Fox, describing daily life on the farm, including the people she met there, the potato picking and roof-thatching, the political and religious discussions, the harvest festivals, choir concerts and barn dances.

These letters came to light in the summer of 2021, when her son, Andrew Fox, recognised his mother on the cover of the book (page 2) about the Frating community

I had just had published – *No Matter How Many Skies Have Fallen: back to the land in wartime Britain* – and got in touch. My book was an oral and documentary history of the farm and its idealistic members during its eleven-year occupation, as well as a discussion of the passionate religious and political ideals of the back-to-the-land movement in wartime and post-war rural England.

An experiment in living

The idea for this new community – one of many established by pacifists during the war, though few lasted as long as Frating – was the work of a group of readers of *The Adelphi*, a literary and political monthly journal, where D.H.Lawrence, John Middleton Murry,

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No matter how many skies have fallen

Back to the land in wartime Britain

Ken Worpole



Left to right: the young Shirley Williams (nee Catlin), Derek Crossfield, Raymond Smith and Helen Johnson on a potato planter, 1948. Photo by kind permission of the family of the late Joanna Dunn.

Vera Brittain, Iris Murdoch, George Orwell and others shared ideas for the future with European religious radicals such as Nikolai Berdyaev, Martin Buber and Simone Weil. Amongst them was Joe Watson, a former blast-furnaceman from Consett, who had been invited south by Middleton Murry in 1941 to rescue a failing socialist education centre at Langham in Essex, though Watson arrived too late to do so.

Joe Watson was a formidable figure, a devout Christian as well as a socialist, and a generous, self-educated man, who inspired all who came within his orbit. It was he who led the group (including several from established East Anglian farming families) from Langham to nearby Frating to set up this new 'experiment in living'. Amongst the project's keenest supporters was Vera Brittain, author of the heart-breaking memoir of First World War loss, *Testament of Youth*, and it is her daughter, the late Shirley Williams, later to become a Labour Cabinet Minister, who is the other young woman standing on the potato-planter in the photograph on the book's cover.

I was not aware of Helen Johnson's letters until after my book was published. Fortunately, the story they told endorsed my own version of the community's fascinating history: a life of hard work, hard winters, redeemed by deep and lasting friendships, wonderful communal meals and harvest suppers, closeness to the natural world, and a feeling of internationalism even on such a small stage.

Although I had written about some of the volunteers from abroad who came to support the farm, especially during harvest time, I was unaware of how important a part they played or where they had come from. Helen's letter to Arthur on Wednesday, 23 August, 1950, reveals all:

'The visitors this time are all perfectly normal. There's Jeanne's mother and sister, and the mother I think is as sweet as Jeanne herself, and Anna, a Dutch schoolmistress who comes here quite often, so Dutch is practically the official language. Then there's Margaret, a German girl, a student at Heidelberg, called Gisela, and myself. Looking around the table the other day I noticed that there were only 6 English to 7 non-English people present, 4 Dutch, 1 German, 1 Austrian and 1 Czech.'

For most of the time, however – from 1943 until 1954, when the co-operative structure was dissolved, the farm having run out of capital to re-invest – Frating's resident community consisted of families and children, more than fifty in number. For more than a decade, Frating Hall Farm was managed as a successful arable and livestock land-holding of 300 acres, with a profitable building unit as well as a fence-making business. On the dissolution of the communal structure, the farm was bought out by one of the Quaker members, whose step-son, Martyn Thomas, is still at the farm today with his family, having been there for more than seventy years, quietly proud of Frating's radical history. It is Martyn who is the young boy in the photograph (front page), standing in the yard watching the unloading of sheaves of corn into the threshing machine, taken in 1950.

Communal harvest

For most of the time, Helen worked out in the fields, often in the company of women from the village paid to help with the vegetable picking. But there were more delightful tasks too. Here she writes of the Hall's generous kitchen garden:

In the afternoon most people went into Colchester, but I sat out in the garden in the sun, helping Irene to bottle plums. She had 56lbs to do, and we got through ¾ of them, which wasn't bad going. She also took me round the kitchen garden by way of a break. They have a lovely old walled vegetable garden, of which David attends to the vegetable half and Irene to the fruit half. David's half is beautifully tidy, because Mrs Heckmann did quite a lot of weeding in it but Irene's, though, not nearly so tidy, has all sorts of exciting things in. There are already peaches, pears, plums and nectarines growing against the wall, and she's put in a whole lot of new ones, and some figs, vines and apricots as well. She's also got an apple cordon planted and a new strawberry bed set out, so there should be all sorts of good things in the years to come.

The cultural life of the Frating community seemed to have compensated for all the hard work, as well as overcoming some of the personal differences among those who lived there. The Harvest suppers in the great barn were remembered fondly by everybody, as were the choral concerts and plays. The members' amateur efforts were sometimes augmented by those of the talented summer visitors who flocked to Frating to help with the harvest, including a number of notable writers and musicians.

In a letter written later in life by another member of the community, Trevor Howard – who had been a farmer before coming to Frating, but left to train for ordination in the Anglican Church – recalled how much he had treasured this aspect of his family's time at Frating:

► Ken Worpole is a writer and social historian. His book about Frating Hall Farm, *No Matter How Many Skies Have Fallen: back to the land in wartime Britain*, is published by Little Toller Books. £14.
www.littletoller.co.uk

'It was above all in the singing and those roped in from outside and to a much lesser extent in the plays, that the community really shone and of course all its forces were gathered together for the great Harvest Festivals in the barn with its wonderful decorations. Hugh Davison preaching like a prophet sent from God, and a galaxy of stars in the very threshold of stardom as singers, instrumentalists and conductors – the suppers, the services, the post supper activities. I don't think we will ever see days like those again and I thank God for the privilege of having been part of them.'

These were the things that Helen Johnson remembers too. She writes wryly about some of the visitors who came to Frating, believing that paradise had already been achieved. They were soon brought down to earth, after a few days of cabbage-lifting in the rain. In another of her letters to Arthur, Helen pens one of the most lucid and insightful passages I've ever read about that most difficult of arts: the art of living together in harmony.

It's a sad thing in a way that the people with great ideas about communities are usually much worse fitters-in than the ordinary people without any theories who just like living at Frating Hall, or even spending their holidays there. I wonder if it's just because the people who're good at living in communities all do live in lots of them, in families and streets and colleges and factories and churches and clubs, and all the other places where people have common interests and a sense of loyalty to one another, and consequently rarely bother to evolve theories on the subject. Certainly, I have a feeling that the more Frating does feel like a community, and the more its individual members fit in, the less they're interested or bothered with theories of what the place is for or about.

I am extremely grateful to Helen's sons, Andrew Fox and Robin Fox, for sharing these letters with me and the surviving members of the Frating community. Still a young woman of twenty-five when she began writing them, her letters are full of life and curiosity – keen to learn about other people, keen to understand how the world works, and to play her full part in it. They are also wholly attentive to the pleasures of the natural world and to the seasonal pageant of rural life – and an unexpected gift to rural history.

The real agricultural revolution

by Paul Brassley

If some miracle had resurrected a farmer's son killed at Waterloo in 1815 and set him to work on a small English farm in 1939, he would have had a fair idea of what to do. The horses and their harness would have been familiar, and so would milking the cows by hand. But delay his resurrection to the Falklands war in 1982 and he would have been baffled. No horses, cows with some strange device attached to their udders, and where were all the farm workers? Something dramatic had happened.

The date debate

To entitle a book *The Real Agricultural Revolution* and place it in the twentieth century, implies a challenge to others who have previously written books with the term 'agricultural revolution' in the title but involving different dates. Chambers and Mingay identified the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as crucial in *The Agricultural Revolution 1750–1880* (1966). The previous year Eric Jones had published an article arguing for 1650 to 1750 as the century that really mattered, and a little later Eric Kerridge, also under the title of *The Agricultural Revolution* (1967), put the case for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Michael Thompson, in a 1968 article, argued for a second agricultural revolution in the nineteenth century based on purchased inputs of fertilisers and feeding stuffs. The debate then seemed to go quiet for several years, perhaps because many of those who might have contributed to it were doing their research for volumes V (1984) and VI (1989) of *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, neither of which reached any unequivocal conclusions about a revolution. It was revived in the 1990s when Bob Allen argued for a yeoman's agricultural revolution before 1750 and, in *Agricultural Revolution in England* (1996), Mark Overton made the case for the 1750–1850 period.¹

So, what would qualify as an agricultural revolution? Presumably the change should

be reasonably rapid if it is to be more than evolutionary. Overton suggested it should also involve changing technologies, feeding a growing population, and productivity increases — especially in land and labour. The years between 1939 and 1985 certainly involved rapid increases in the volume of output, with an annual average of about 2.8 per cent, and a long list of technical changes such as: new varieties of cereals and grasses; new crops such as oilseed rape; the use of artificial insemination in cattle and pigs; new livestock breeds; the increased use of fertilisers and pesticides, and the replacement of horses by tractors. Whereas in the century after 1750 English farmers fed an extra seven or eight million people, in the half-century after 1939 they fed an extra fifteen million, with significant increases in land and labour productivity, albeit at the expense of extra capital. Using these criteria, the post-war period qualifies as revolutionary. But why did the revolution happen then, and not earlier, and how did it spread across the whole agricultural industry? These are the questions that the book sets out to answer.

Fieldbooks

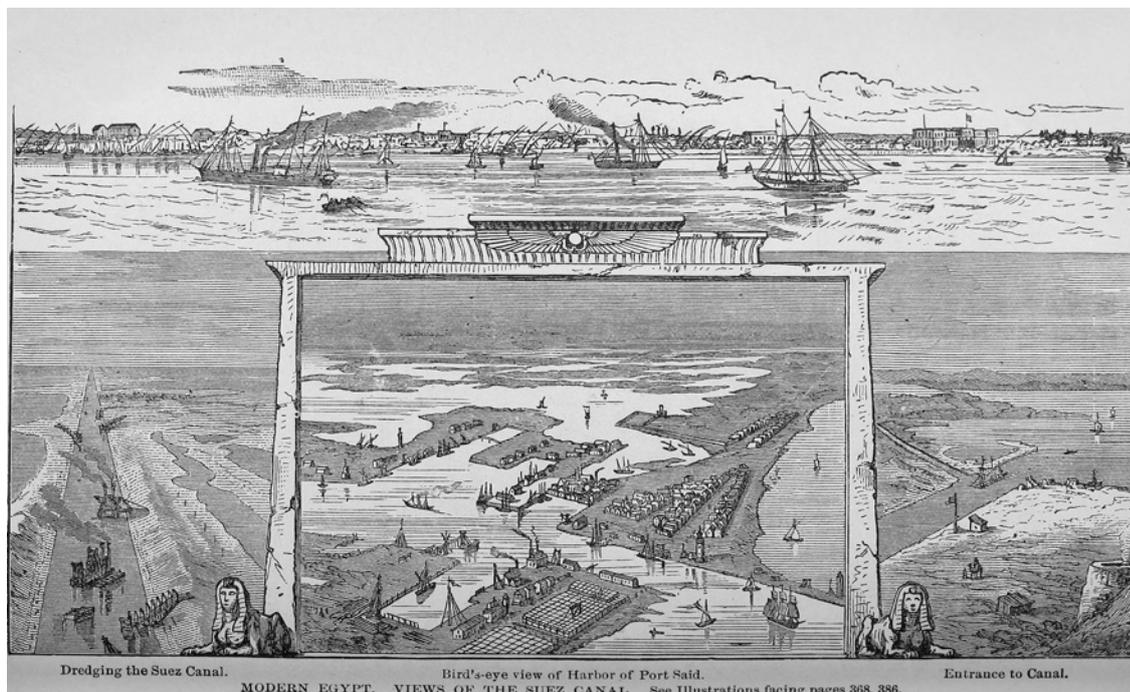
The outline of the story is well-known. Threats to food imports during the Second World War, and the problem of paying for them afterwards, made successive governments receptive to the idea of increasing home food production. They chose to do so, until the mid-1980s, by funding scientific research in the hope of improving farming methods, and adopting agricultural policies that would give farmers

Continued on back page

¹ Although in his most recent work, in Broadberry *et al's* *British Economic Growth 1270–1870* (2015), he argued that 'progress was rarely more than evolutionary' between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, 'since agricultural output never grew at more than 1 per cent a year'.

Landscapes of fear and fertility

Samuel Grinsell discusses Empire and the making of the Nile Valley, 1880s–1920s



'Modern Egypt, views of the Suez Canal', from Rev. Joseph Angus, *The Bible Hand-Book: an introduction to the study of sacred scripture* (Philadelphia: J. Fagan & Son, 1883), facing page 374.

The European colonialists who governed much of the world by the end of the nineteenth century had grand ambitions to remake global landscapes according to their own logic. Central to this, of course, was the effective exploitation of land, plants, animals, and people in the service of global trade run for the benefit of the great imperial powers. Tangled up with this was a Christian ethic of land stewardship, in which to make fertile was to do Godly work, and many landscapes unfamiliar to the temperate regions of the Earth were viewed as wastelands: deserts, swamps and jungles were taken to be land going to waste. Colonial officials were, therefore, tasked with making colonised land 'productive': both commercially viable and more 'orderly', according to their assumptions about what well-managed land ought to look like. In Egypt and Sudan this meant mastering the flow of the Nile, maximising the area available for agriculture (especially cotton), and separating human life from the desert. In this article, I bring together three sites to consider how colonialism remade the Nile Valley.

Dredging Suez

Visions of the improving power of the empire can be found in the most surprising places. In Joseph Angus' *The Bible Hand-Book: an introduction to the study of sacred scripture* (Philadelphia: J. Fagan & Son, 1883) we find grand images of the making of the modern world, particularly in regions associated with the Bible. This illustration (above), for example, uses imagery associated with ancient Egypt to frame scenes of the dredging of the Suez Canal: the harbour of Port Said; the entrance to the Canal; and a bustling array of ships outside a port.¹ The Canal runs straight as a ruler, an icon of modern rationality. Ships, warehouses and factories tell of booming commerce, while a camel in the image of the Canal entrance evokes the desert landscape that has been transformed. The building of the Suez Canal (opened 1869) was an international project under French leadership; Britain initially opposed it, seeing it as a threat to its control over global trade, but later bought a controlling stake in the Suez Canal Company, thus securing significant power and wealth for the British Empire. By placing images of its making alongside religious texts, this source places modern



Former All Saints' Cathedral, now Republican Palace Museum, Khartoum, Sudan, David Stanley 2013.

colonial engineering within a Christian vision of human history as management of the landscape.

Flood and dust

Colonialists often felt apprehensive about the unfamiliar environments that they were tasked with transforming. When architect Robert Weir Schultz was asked to design Khartoum's first Anglican church, seen above, one of his first requests was for information on the site's soil. The church committee sent him a selection of samples, pointing out that when the Nile was in flood the land itself was transformed from a light, dry dust to a thick sod. Moreover, when the earth was dry, dust blew along roads and into doorways. Weir Schultz designed a large, concrete foundation to cope with the changing soil conditions and raised the church on a platform, to try to minimise the extent to which dust blew into it. At times, the whole city of Khartoum

could be engulfed by *haboobs*, great dust storms generated by desert thunderstorms. This phenomenon was first studied in Sudan, before it was understood that it can occur in many of the world's deserts. Alongside postcards of Khartoum's streets and buildings, colonial tourists could purchase images of haboobs sweeping over the city, obscuring human works in a thick cloud of dust.

Transforming the Nile

While the Suez Canal transformed global shipping routes, control of the River Nile – source of almost all water in Egypt – was essential for governance of Egypt and Sudan. Ottoman-Egyptian engineers had developed new systems of channels and barrages to harvest the Nile's flood during the nineteenth century, relying on extensive forced labour to capture as much water as possible. The British sought a way to store yet more water, and assert their hydrological

expertise over the Egyptian engineers, who had a better understanding of how existing strategies worked.² The first Aswan Dam was built between 1899-1902, and subsequently extended in 1907-1912. The Dam marked the beginning of perennial Nile irrigation, the grand project of British colonial engineers. They hoped that when the Dam's sluices were fully open, the rich earth carried northwards by the river would continue to pass through. Sedimentation in the reservoir, however, has been far more extensive than they intended; the Dam did extend the cultivatable land of Egypt by improving the supply of water, but it also held back much of the natural fertiliser that once accompanied the flood. This is even changing Egypt's coastline; the delta was growing into the Mediterranean until the early twentieth century but is now in retreat, as the earth carried north by the river cannot compensate for that carried away by the rising sea.

The colonial history of the Nile Valley challenges our assumptions about where the boundaries between urban, rural and environmental histories lie. To understand All Saints' Cathedral, Khartoum, we need to consider the relationship between the earth and the river. The Aswan Dam, built to service Egyptian agriculture, has had such an impact on the relationship between water and land that it is changing the very shape of Egypt. Colonialists – and the tourists, photographers, bankers, journalists, nature writers and others who followed – were often torn between fear of the vast lands they encountered, and awe at the power of infrastructure to remake them.³ The texts, images and material culture they produced, can help inform our understanding of the ways in which colonial endeavours continue to shape the world.

The British Empire in the Nile Valley

For much of the nineteenth century Egypt operated as an autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire, known as Cairo after its capital and ruled by a viceroy known as the *Khedive*. In the 1820s, its armies conquered the territories to the south: the Sudan. Financing the building of the Suez Canal put Cairo heavily in debt to its European creditors, led by France and Britain. These powers increasingly interfered with the governance of Egypt, and in 1882 a mutiny in the Egyptian Army prompted a British invasion. The British Consul was made the effective ruler of Egypt and Sudan, ostensibly on behalf of the Khedive. During the First World War, Egypt was made a protectorate of Britain. It finally

gained full autonomy in 1956, after successfully nationalising the Suez Canal - against the wishes of Britain and France. In 1884 Muhammad Ahmad, a religious figurehead, led a rebellion in Sudan. It became independent until conquered by Anglo-Egyptian forces in 1896-98. The British and Egyptians agreed to rule together in a system known as the Condominium. From the 1920s, Britain increasingly sought to use its power over the Nile in Sudan, in order to maintain influence over an increasingly self-assertive Egypt. Sudanese elites included in government gradually took power, and the country eventually gained independence in 1956.

1 On the construction of this area see Lucia Carminati, 'Port Said and Ismailia as Desert Marvels: Delusion and Frustration on the Isthmus of Suez, 1859-1869', *Journal of Urban History* 46, no. 3 (2020): 622-647.

2 For more on this see Jennifer Derr, *The Lived Nile: Environment, Disease, and Material Colonial Economy in Egypt* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019).

3 I have written more extensively on this tension in Samuel Grinsell, 'Mastering the Nile? Confidence and anxiety in D.S. George's photographs of the first Aswan Dam, 1899-1912', *Environmental History* 25, no. 1 (2020): 110-133.

Hidden histories of the countryside

Susanne Seymour reveals some of the links between transatlantic slavery and rural Nottinghamshire



Studies of Britain's 'home' connections to historical transatlantic enslavement have typically focused on the westerly port cities of Bristol, Liverpool and Glasgow, or the capital, London: great centres of trade and political debate.

Until recently, the countryside has been overlooked. But historical research, such as that I undertake as director of the Institute for the Study of Slavery, at the University of Nottingham, is steadily uncovering ways in which rural Britain has connections to transatlantic slavery. These include links through a range of rural residents. On the one hand there were the absentee (or transatlantic) owners of enslaved people, those who acted as transatlantic colonial officials, and those who benefitted from colonial trades linked to enslavement. On the other hand, there is evidence of enslaved, or formerly enslaved, rural residents of African descent and both black and white abolitionists.

Material goods also provide connections. Valuable and vital raw materials produced by enslaved workers — most prominently sugar, tobacco and cotton, but also more elite materials such as mahogany — fuelled industrialisation, manufacture and consumption in the British countryside. A range of other goods were produced for trading or support of transatlantic enslavement: metal ores to make guns, plantation implements and copper-bottomed ships; timber for the ships of the merchant and royal navies; and cotton, linen and woollen textiles used to trade for and

clothe the enslaved. The wealth generated contributed to the rural landscape and built environment, from canals and railways, mills and mines, to fields and woods, parks and gardens, and elite and more modest forms of housing.

A landlocked legacy

The Legacies of British Slave-ownership (LBS) project has highlighted the considerable geographical reach of enslavement connections in the 1830s when, to smooth abolition of slavery in its Atlantic colonies, Britain paid compensation to those claiming ownership of enslaved people. Eastern and interior counties are far from excluded (see www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/maps/britain) and, despite being landlocked, with a mixed rural economy of agriculture and small-scale industry during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries — and the remnants of the Royal Forest of Sherwood — Nottinghamshire is one.

Perhaps most obviously, links can be found through the presence of those who were enslavers, profiting from the forced trafficking of people of African descent and their lifelong labour on plantations in the Americas. A recent search of the LBS database revealed 10 such individuals with Nottinghamshire addresses, six beyond the county town of Nottingham. These include women as well as men and landed, mercantile and professional figures who owned from three to several hundred enslaved people.



One such was Colonel Thomas Wildman, owner of the

substantial Newstead Abbey estate in the early nineteenth century. Wildman came from a family enmeshed in Atlantic enslavement and plantation management. His father, Thomas Wildman senior, had been business manager and attorney to perhaps the most famous and wealthy of British slave owners: William Beckford of Fonthill. The fortune he amassed from this work included the Quebec estate in St Mary parish, Jamaica and its enslaved workforce. He left the bulk of his wealth and property to his son Thomas who used it to fund the purchase and renovation of Newstead Abbey and its estate, enhanced by £4,588 15s 11d compensation for 241 enslaved people of African descent paid to Wildman in 1835 after Britain abolished slavery in its Atlantic colonies.

Above left: Newstead Abbey, Nottinghamshire Photograph by Will Robson.

Above: Colonel Thomas Wildman (1787–1859). (Unfinished portrait by Thomas Lawrence, 1831)

Other members of Nottinghamshire landed society were connected to transatlantic enslavement through government, colonial and military service, particularly in the Royal Navy. The most important families held properties in the Dukeries region of north Nottinghamshire. The 3rd Duke of Portland, owner of the Welbeck estate, was a leading British political figure, twice acting as prime minister. He supported his extensive Anglo-Dutch Bentinck family in acquiring colonial office, some in the British Caribbean where they also became owners of plantations and enslaved people. Portland and his eldest son supported both the slave trade and slavery, whilst a younger son spoke for the abolitionist cause in the 1820s.¹

Earl Manvers, owner of the nearby Thoresby estate, is one of a number of men from landed families who served in the Royal Navy and who commemorated pro-slavery naval veterans in their park landscapes. Typically commemoration took the form of named plantations, mock battles on the extensive lakes and specific eye-catching monuments. At Thoresby Park, Manvers commemorated Admiral Rodney leader of the naval defence and expansion of Britain's Caribbean colonies during both the Seven Years War and the American War of Independence. Manvers had served under Rodney in his first naval appointment and his naming of a small plantation, Rodney Clump, probably marked the Admiral's death in 1792. More pragmatically, the old stands of trees in the Dukeries' parks and the wider Sherwood Forest contributed substantial supplies of timber for ship building. Conversely, most country houses included furniture and fittings made from mahogany, a wood predominantly harvested by enslaved workers in the Americas.²

Transatlantic threads

Beyond landed society there were many other connections to transatlantic slavery; notably those of the county's substantial textile industry. Rural rivers were an important source of power for textile (and other) mills. Prominent amongst these were cotton spinning mills which expanded rapidly in south Nottinghamshire in the later eighteenth century, along rivers such as the Leen.³ Developed in the wake of a series of technological innovations, including those



'Paragon un Barbe', one of a series of 1658 engravings including both black and white grooms, in front of Welbeck Abbey, Nottinghamshire. The University of Nottingham, Department of Manuscripts and Special Collections, OS album Not.1 D14 ALB.

of Richard Arkwright and partners in the nearby Derwent Valley, Derbyshire, their raw material was not local. In fact most of the nation's raw cotton supplies came from the enslavement-based production systems of the Caribbean, Brazil and the southern states of America, with the latter dominating supplies into the 1860s. While the specific sources of the raw cotton supplies of the mill owners of Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site have been interrogated in some detail, those of rural Nottinghamshire are less well known — but likely to reflect national trends. The hosiery and lace trades for which Nottingham became famous also drew strongly on cotton thread and extended into the south Nottinghamshire countryside.

Evidence of the enslaved, or formerly enslaved, is arguably less prominent in rural Nottinghamshire and not all seventeenth to nineteenth century residents of African descent can be linked to transatlantic enslavement.⁴ Yet there are fleeting glimpses. These include the black boy servant of the Duchess of Kingston, likely trafficked through the transatlantic slave trade and in effect enslaved, who may have visited Thoresby in the later eighteenth century. Another formerly enslaved man, the leading boxer, Tom Molineaux of African-American descent, was commemorated by the poet Byron in a dressing screen at Newstead

Abbey.⁵ Later in the 19th century, a range of African American abolitionists visited rural Nottinghamshire on lecture tours seeking support to end slavery in America. Yet these examples are just a fraction of the enslaved who contributed to the development of rural Nottinghamshire.

► Further information about Nottinghamshire's connections with enslavement and colonialism can be found at www.nottingham.ac.uk/isos/research/rural-legacies.aspx

- 1 Haggerty, S and Seymour, S (2018) Imperial Careering and Enslavement in the Long Eighteenth Century: the Bentinck Family, 1710–1830s. *Slavery & Abolition* 39(4) 642–662.
- 2 Anderson, J L (2004) Nature's Currency: The Atlantic Mahogany Trade and the Commodification of Nature in the Eighteenth Century. *Early American Studies* 2 (1) 47–80.
- 3 Walker, S (2020) Spinning Yarns: A Tale of Landscape Archaeology in the Leen Valley, Nottinghamshire. *Industrial Archaeology Review* 42(1) 29–47.
- 4 Maguire, R (2014) Presenting the history of Africans in provincial Britain: Norfolk as a case study. *History*, 99 (338) 819–838.
- 5 Bates, H and Seymour, S (2020) *Newstead Abbey's Slavery, Colonial and Black Histories*. Unpublished report for Nottingham City Museums and Galleries.

Continued from page 3

an incentive to increase output. Agricultural economists at the time put a lot of work into analysing the process. However, as historians of technology have argued, albeit not in an agricultural context, they treated it as though the science and policy were put into a 'black box' from which new methods, new products, lower costs and higher outputs inevitably emerged. The contents of the box, with a few exceptions, remained unexamined, even though the specific features of individual technologies can affect all sorts of variables — from the way in which producers learn about them, to the speed of technology transfer to the effectiveness of government policies. It's the task of the agricultural historian to try to peer inside the box and examine its contents. But how?

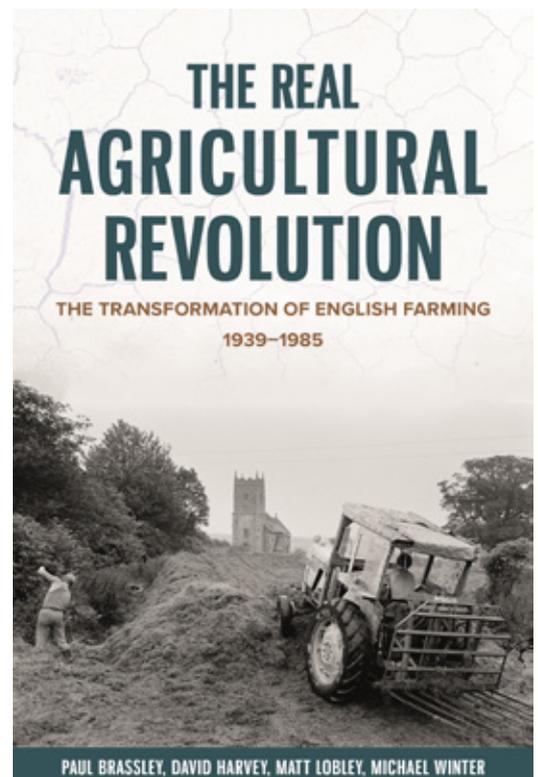
Several years ago, the Centre for Rural Policy Research at the University of Exeter moved out of the building it had occupied for several decades, and the enormous archive in the basement had to be cleared. Professor Michael Winter, who was then the head of the Centre, saw the possibilities of the archive and decided to have it examined by an agricultural historian. He rang me. I went to Exeter and found that much of the archive consisted of the fieldbooks produced by the Investigation Officers of the Farm Management Survey. These were the people who visited farms and made detailed annual records of crops, livestock, sales, purchases, machinery, buildings, and so on.

The survival of their fieldbooks meant that we had a sample of farms across Cornwall, Devon, and Dorset between the 1940s and the 1980s whose development we could follow in detail.

Michael obtained grants that included an award from the Economic and Social Research Council that paid for me to be employed as a research fellow and work on the records along with Michael, Matt Lobley and David Harvey. We found that some of the farmers involved were still alive, so we could interview them, and often find the answers to the questions that the fieldbooks couldn't answer: what made you decide to change the dairy herd from, say, South Devons to Friesians, and why did you do it in year x and not earlier or later; how much care did you take over the selection of grass varieties; why did you decide to stop growing root crops?

Unlocking the 'Black Box'

What we had, therefore, was a source that enabled us to peer inside the black box during the years when agriculture was changing most rapidly. We could examine the ways in which the findings of an expanding body of agricultural scientists were taken by



a growing cohort of advisers and technical experts and transformed into technologies that farmers could use. We could explore the reasons why some farmers were eager adopters of new methods while others were more reluctant to change. We began to understand why some scientific discoveries could rapidly be converted into usable techniques while others took more time to have some effect — or had no impact at all. We could look beneath the relatively smooth growth of national output statistics to reveal the turbulence and complexity of events at the level of individual farms, and in the minds of farmers, during this real revolution in agriculture.

That's what our book is about. We begin with the story of post-war agricultural science and advisory work, and follow the twists and turns of the policy arguments that resulted, in the end, in a fairly consistent output-expanding approach, sometimes despite the strong opposition of the Treasury. Then, largely using dairy farming in south-west England as an example, we look at the adoption of new technologies and the impact that their adoption had on farming systems. Amid the complexity of our findings some features stand out: the importance of farmers' confidence that the economic environment within was stable enough to justify new investment; the influence of a new generation in precipitating change; and the interaction of technologies so that an individual development could result in a radical re-ordering of an entire farming system. What would Wellington's soldier have thought about it?

► *The Real Agricultural Revolution: The Transformation of English Farming, 1939-1985* by Paul Brassley, Michael Winter, Matt Lobley and David Harvey is published by Boydell Press, h/b £60.00, ebook £19.99, www.boydellandbrewer.com

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