

Warnham Historical Society

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Notes on Early Agriculture in Warnham

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We have seen that Warnham probably evolved as a settlement from the coming together of a number of surrounding swine pastures of Saxon origins colonised from some larger settlement, perhaps Steyning, in the south of the Rape of Bramber. In the middle or late 12th century these were brought together as a parish centred on the Church. What else existed in the village at this time is not known, but we do know that in 1247 the vicar was entitled to the tithe on two holdings, those of Robert Blund and William le Dene (Denne?)

There is no evidence of any common land or central strip cultivation and pasturage adjacent to the village, which suggests that the outlying farms, as entities, may have preceded the settlement of the village itself, and that the early farms established their land by direct agreement with the Lord and gradually extended their cultivated fields from further clearances in the forest largely for their own subsistence and that of their stock. This seems to have been the established pattern by the end of the 13th century, as we can see from the Lay Subsidy Rolls in 1296 and 1327 and 1332, but on what condition or on what payment of dues to the Lord or to the Church, we do not know.

They would by this time have built their scattered mediaeval timber-framed houses in the woodland, of which we can still see the evidence today, and would have been keeping a number of oxen as well as their herds of swine. The irregular curved pattern of the boundaries in the fields and roadways, and the residual shaws, provide evidence of the piecemeal extension of boundaries as the forest was cleared.

In an analysis of the farms existing in the parish in the 1840s, 60% date from the 15th century or earlier and 33% from the 12th or 13th century.

Whilst agriculture was the over-riding activity, and the reason for opening up the land, there may have been some isolated areas where the clearance was attributable to iron-founding and forging activities in bloomeries, using large quantities of charcoal (and clay). This would have preceded the more widespread iron industry in the Weald of Sussex which grew up in the 16th and 17th centuries, with the introduction of the blast furnace needing vast quantities of both wood and water power, with which the area was well endowed. (Cider Mill Farm could well have been Cinder Mill, but no evidence has been obtained of an early bloomery there or elsewhere in the parish, but there are signs in some neighbouring parishes.)

Farming in the 12th and 13th centuries was still very primitive, and it seems probable that each farm or unit would have been self-supporting, with little produce to spare for the wider and, more or less inaccessible, town fairs or markets, after providing for the Great and Small Tithes. The farmer would have been dependent on himself and his family. The incidence of the Black Death must have resulted in great hardship and loss for many of these families.

In the 14th and 15th centuries when the wool industry became the source of growing wealth with a profitable export outlet to the Sussex Coast, no doubt sheep became a regular part of the farm stock, and this perhaps accounts for the opening up of more pasturage and small fields. However this was not as good sheep-rearing land as further south on the Downs, nearer the Coast.

It is clear that a major expansion took place in Tudor times when there was a general growth in prosperity. It was at this time that most of the older

existing houses were extended or rebuilt with halls for the better off, and when the Carylls and the Michells became the major independent landowners. Despite this there does not seem to have been any major problem through any enclosures by the landlords, and most of the farmland remained on lease to the free tenants owing services to the Lord of the Manor. This period saw the arrival of the Yeoman farmers and probably the beginning of real attempts to improve the land.

Even by the 17th century the average size of farms in the Weald was under 100 acres, compared with those on the Downs of 350 acres. Some were as small as 16-20 acres. The cultivation by that time consisted of approximately one-third arable (wheat, oats or peas), one-third pasture and one-third woodland and waste.

Most of the land is wet soggy clay cut out of the forest and difficult to cultivate. The existence of shaws causes shade and poor soil near the boundaries of fields. It is thus not particularly suitable for growing cereals unless very competently drained. In the earlier times ploughing was extremely difficult. 8-10 oxen or 4 horses were needed to draw a plough, and it was only possible to plough 1/2 an acre in a day. Oxen were mainly used for ploughing and traction until the middle of the 19th century. Attempts were made to lighten the soil by marling or liming. The extent of this is shown by the field names given in the Tithe Award lists of 1840, e.g. Marl Plat, Marl Croft, Little Marl Field, Kiln Field, Lime Kiln Plat, Lower Kiln Plat, etc., and the indications of the existence of the old lime kilns themselves. The lime was dragged by oxen all the way from the chalk pits of the Downs along the terrible Sussex roads. This practice continued in use during the 17th century and even later. An inventory of the effects of a Warnham husbandman gives details of the implements used in liming. The chalk was heated in the kilns which were fed by furze grown especially for the purpose. The Tithe Records show at least five fields described as Furze, Old Furze and Furze Field. By the early 19th century the use of furze had declined due to the availability of coal transported via the Wey and Arun rivers.

During the Napoleonic wars, there was a great increase in the demand for corn when much new land was ploughed up, and over 60% of the land in Warnham was turned over to arable. The Tithe Records of 1840 show that in the Parish, 2893 acres were arable, 712 acres pasture, leaving 1292 acres of woodland, waste or unaccounted for. Much of the land in the vicinity of the village is drained by land drains, believed to have been laid by French prisoners of war in the war years.

The other feature adversely affecting cultivation was the legacy from the clearance of the forests in the form of the residual shaws, often on the reverse and difficult slopes, which can still be seen today. This has not only, until quite recently, dictated the small average size of the fields, but had its adverse effect on adjacent crops and the quality of the land.

With these limitations, and with the difficulty of poor communications for getting crops to market, it seems that even as late as the end of the 18th century, except in wartime or emergencies, the growing of crops was secondary to grazing and restricted to what was necessary for the survival of the farmer, his family and his stock.

In this latter regard oxen and horses have large appetites and the pre-tractor age was fuelled by crops grown to feed the draft animals on which so much depended. The Sussex cattle were of a breed pre-eminently suitable for work and for beef. In the 17th century they were highly praised by Mascall. Admittedly they did not produce much milk, but it was of excellent quality. The cows were not mated until 3 years of age, therefore their productive life did not begin much before four. The oxen did better and started work at two. They were used as draft animals until between six and ten years old, when they were fattened for beef. The fattening diet for steers was based on vetches, pea, boiled or dried barley, beans and elm leaves, surprising in a predominantly oat growing area.

Horses were of a fairly light breed, which could be used on the land, as the big heavy cart-horses were unsuitable for farm work owing to sinking deeper in the heavy clay soil. The lighter breed however were not considered large enough for van work, hence the reliance until much later when the roads improved on the oxen for haulage.

Apart from the cattle, the only other animal kept on any scale was the hog, which had been the original stock. These ran wild in the unenclosed woodlands. Nearly every farm worker fattened one. It was his only source of meat. Their diet was interesting. They were said to fatten best on dry meal and beer. To quote "If you can make him drunk now and then you will make him into a notable fat hog."

There was a considerable trade in fat hogs and this no doubt is what the Warnham farmers drove to the various Horsham fairs. They were a black breed, considered a good hardy species, equal to any other taking weight for age. In 1591, 400 salted hogs were sent to the Navy at Southampton.

As already mentioned not many sheep were kept before the 19th century, and these mostly Southdowns or Kents for wintering.

Geese were kept by farmers for the Xmas market and, right down to the end of the 19th century many cottagers had the right to graze one or more geese on Broadbridge Heath.

According to Henry Smith, born at Southwater in 1827, quoted in "Causeway", from which much of the information in these notes is based, the poultry kept in the village would mostly be Surrey or Dorkings, which used to be fattened by cramming - a cruel process - or caponed for the Xmas market. In many old leases it was laid down that the farmer had to supply his landlord gratis with two capons.

From quite early times a policy of rotation of crops seems to have been followed. Depending on the times, anything between one-third and one-half of most farms was cropped and the rest was meadow or woodland. The usual rotation, at the time that the Rev. Arthur Young wrote in 1813, was fallow, wheat, oats and ley. It is interesting to remember that, until the coming of artificial fertilisers and selective weedkillers in the 1930s, many farmers in this district found it necessary to leave their arable fields fallow every third year.

Writing of the early 19th century Henry Smith describes the farming implements in use (Causeway - Vol. V, p.94-95) "Ploughs were made of wood with wrought iron fittings, the shares being about 3 feet long and the boys who drove the ploughs used to take the shares to the blacksmith two or three times a week...Horse harrows were for a pair of horses and drag harrows for four horses. Rollers were made of wood generally. wagons and carts were usually made with six inch wheels to save the tolls and to avoid cutting into soft roads..." Of the smaller tools - "...the most useful at that time, viz. the flail, on which much depended, and which gave music to the farmers ear. An old-fashioned farmer was asked by his daughter for a musical instrument. His reply was that there was no music equal to two flails and a cuckoo, as any farmer who could hold over his corn until the cuckoo came was prosperous and wheat at that time was usually at the highest price."

"Milking was generally performed by farmers wives, daughters and maid-servants."

"Wheat, oats and barley were sown by hand; peas, beans also, unless a man could be hired to dibble them in. A man with a pair of dibblers three feet long with a sharp iron point, would walk backwards over the ploughed land, punching holes at the end of the furrows into which the peas and beans were dropped by five or six children who followed him having bags round their waists in which they carried the peas or beans. An active man in this way would dibble an acre of land in a

day. The children were paid 4d. a day each and the dibbler was paid 6s. per acre."

"Reaping was the usual way of cutting wheat leaving stubble nearly a foot high to be cut after the corn had been gathered in. Reaping cost from 10-12s. per acre; stubble cutting 2s. or 2/6d. per acre. Oats, barley, etc., were mown with scythes. This was considered the hardest form of farm work. Hay-making too, like the cutting of corn, was without the aid of machines, the hay being tossed about by hand. This gave the women employment. They also did the weeding of the corn, and were a great help to the farmers...They were paid 1/- per day and the men getting 2/- per day".

The first steam thrashing machine was not introduced to Warnham before about 1865 by Albert Agate, farming at Bailing Hill, where he also manufactured bone meal for the market. In the 1880s Moses Muggeridge ran a steam thrashing machine from Maltmayes.

"Little of the land was suitable for roots, not many were grown. Only a few acres of swedes and turnips...men were not used to hoeing...and did not like to hoe these."

According to Henry Smith "After the corn had been put into the barn or stack thrashing usually began and, in the course of a few days, new samples of wheat were put on the market. wheat thrashing was paid for at the rate of 5d. or 6d. a bushel or 3/4d or 4/- per quarter unless the yield was very good. Men could not thrash more than four bushels per day. Thrashing oats 1/4d. to 1/6d. per quarter; other corn and pulse the same in proportion."

It will be seen that in this post-Napoleonic war period, arable cultivation had been considerably increased, and this increased output from the farms, but wages were miserably poor and there was much unemployment. During the 1830s, as described elsewhere, there were considerable agricultural disturbances all over Sussex, and clearly the marketing of surplus crops presented problems.

"Farmers, who had difficulty in marketing their butter and poultry etc., used to sell to men who came with a cart and were called 'hucksters' who took it to the market towns." (Henry Smith)

Wages were very low, only 10/- to 12/- per week by the day. Farm labourers who occupied the cottages or farm tenements paid 1/6d. to 2/- per week, and found it difficult to make ends meet. Most of them, however, had a croft or large garden so they, or their wives, could keep their own pigs and poultry and grow vegetables. Most of the wives too had to help on the farm to increase earnings.

This "Golden Age" of corn was short-lived. The wheat grown on the soggy land was of inferior quality compared to that of other areas and could not compete with the influx of dry high quality wheat from the New World. The arable areas were continually reduced in favour of pasture and dairying, but the arrival of cheap refrigerated beef from Argentina, Australia and New Zealand in the 1870s, followed by a series of bad harvests, led to very hard times. Most of the local farmers persisted with their beef cattle during the second half of the 19th century, but towards the end of the century, a number of West Country farmers moved into the area, complete with their dairy cattle, encouraged by the low rent of farms in the area (£1.50 per acre compared with £3.50 in Somerset) and the good communication by rail with the London market for their milk, for which they were able to get 2d. per gallon more than in the West Country. Thereafter dairy farming remained the most important aspect of farming until World War I when the demand for home-produced corn increased and arable farming again assumed priority. Between 1872 and 1909 40% of the former arable land in Sussex became grassland, and no doubt Warnham corresponded to this pattern. (Nationally between 1870 and 1914 the total corn area declined by 30% and permanent grassland doubled.)