

Farming in North-west Devon at the Dawn of the Nineteenth Century

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When trying to recreate the agricultural landscape of north-west Devon in the early 1800s, we are fortunate to be able to use an agricultural survey, Charles Vancouver's *A General View of the Agriculture of the County of Devon*,¹ which was commissioned by the then recently formed Board of Agriculture and was first published in 1808. In fact, this volume covers the whole county and indeed, other volumes were produced for the remainder of England and Wales. For the purposes of this article, I am going to concentrate on the north-west of Devon, where the majority of Braunds lived.

This was a time when there was additional pressure on farmers to increase production. Firstly, the years between 1800 and 1850 saw the country's population double in size. In addition, the Napoleonic wars led, in 1806, to a blockade of European ports, meaning that food imports were no longer possible and the country had to become self-sufficient. To this end, more marginal land was being brought under cultivation and measures were taken to ensure that productivity was maximised. The Board or Society for the Encouragement of Agriculture and Internal Improvement had been founded in 1793. Apart from overseeing the survey, the Board also encouraged the staging of agricultural shows. It was dissolved in 1822 and reborn as the government Board of Agriculture in 1893.

Population and Properties

In 1801, there were just over 166 people per square acre in North Devon. Vancouver comments on, "the longevity and healthy old age of the peasantry", being "ascribed to their simple ailment (diet), and the regularity and exercise necessarily connected with rural life."

Tenure

Most of the proprietors would have been leaseholders, holding land that was owned by the large landowners, such as the Rolle Estate. Leases were commonly for ninety nine years, or to last for three lives. The lives nominated usually included young children or servants, in the hope of optimising the length of the term. Those who died could be replaced by

nominating a new life, usually in return for a fine, known as heriot. This was often still the best beast, rather than a monetary payment.

This allowed security of tenure and made it worthwhile for tenants to improve the land. It also meant that farms might be occupied by the same family for generations, even if they did not own the land. Leases often contained covenants obliging tenants to fertilise the fields by dressing them with lime. This would come from the many lime kilns that were erected along the Taw and Torridge, including at Clovelly, Bucks Mills and Hartland. Lime cost from 13d-16½d per bushel.² Tenants might also be obliged to operate some form of crop rotation, for example the lease might state that they were not to grow more than three 'white straw' crops in succession. During the fourth year they would have to grow a crop such as clover, or the field would be left fallow.

An average farm in North Devon was between 200 and 300 acres but there were also a large number of small holdings of less than fifty acres. When farms came up for sale, they would normally be auctioned in a Bideford pub. An acre of good, dry land would fetch between 18/- and 26/-. Poorer land, which was still capable of producing a wheat crop, would sell for between 12/- and 16/-. Pasture cost from 7/- to 10/- an acre. Unlike other parts of the country, there was very little enclosure in North Devon. The process of enclosure, begun in Tudor times and was continued in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Common land would be enclosed and sold off, depriving the locals of rights to the common. These might be rights to graze livestock or collect firewood and were vital to the poorer inhabitants. In theory, the labourers would be allocated some of the enclosed land in compensation for the loss of common rights but this was often poor quality or inconveniently situated.

Buildings

Buildings, particularly for the ordinary citizen, were usually constructed from whatever was close to hand, as the transportation of building materials was difficult and expensive. In North Devon, this was mud and many of the farm houses, outbuildings and cottages were made from cob. This is mud mixed with straw, rubble and dung and might be erected on a stone base. Whitewash or lime wash would protect the cob, reflect the heat and deter

insects. The walls, which would be two or three feet thick, provided excellent insulation. Windows would be small, roofs thatched and floors were often compacted earth. Larger farm houses might be of the traditional Devon long-house or cross passage style. Originally these were single story dwellings, divided by the cross passage and providing accommodation for livestock at one end and people at the other. By the 1800s, they had largely been converted so that both ends were used for human habitation and most had had an upper story added.

Cottages frequently consisted of a single living and cooking space downstairs, perhaps with a scullery for messy tasks such as plucking chickens. A large hearth, with a brick built chimney, would provide an opportunity to smoke meat and a bread oven would usually be found to one side. The poorest cottages might still be accessing their upper story by means of a ladder, rather than a staircase. Upstairs would be the bedroom for the adults and the youngest children, with older children being allocated the area in to which the stairs opened as their sleeping space. Furnishings would be functional, sparse and wooden. Many householders would still be making their own furniture. Those who were not in tied cottages might pay rent of £2 a year, for a cottage with enough ground to grow potatoes and vegetables. Those with smaller gardens, sufficient only for cultivating pot herbs, might rent for 30/-.

Building costs in the area might be 22d-24d for the construction of a stone wall 16½ feet long, 22 inches thick and a foot high. This was the ideal basis upon which a cob cottage might be constructed. An additional 2d a bushel for lime for the mortar would be charged. The employer was expected to provide scaffolding and three quarts of cider or beer a day for the mason and his attendants. The total cost of stonework for a wall of these dimensions was likely to be 5/- or 6/-, which would cover the cost of quarrying and carting the stone and the wages. Many rooms in the old cottages and farms in the area are approximately 14 feet square, this allows for the thickness of the walls and relates to an external measurement of 16½ feet. This is the old measurement known as a rod, pole or perch. It is also a distance across which a roof could practically be supported. The cob above the stone base would cost 3/6 per perch. If carpenters or masons were paid by the day, rather than for a specific task, they could expect 2/2 a day plus their allowance of beer or cider. Thatch

cost 8/- for an area ten feet by ten feet. This area would require approximately 100 sheaves of wheat straw reed, which weighed 25lb each.

Maintenance of farm houses was usually the responsibility of the landlord but cottages would be repaired by the tenant. The Agricultural Survey describes a shortage of cottages in the area. Of course, it is impossible to tell what sort of condition these cottages were in. Vancouver describes model cottages provided for Lord Clifford's tenants. These had two upstairs rooms, with windows, a garden sufficient to grow potatoes and an orchard that could yield 1-2 hogsheads of cider a year. These orchards replaced the former grazing land for a cow. The orchard was deemed to be a better proposition, presumably because the cow might die. He also mentions a figure of £3 as the approximate cost of building a labourer's cottage,

Soil and Climate

The soil and the climate dictate what farms can produce. Vancouver wrote of the soil, "throughout the parishes of Monkleigh and Buckland Brewer the free or Dunstone soil prevails, occasionally varied with small veins of a cedar-colour on a substratum of rubbly loam, in which there are sometime found black flints or firestones." It was a well-watered soil, suitable for cereal and root crops. The soil was improved by using lime, ashes or woollen rags. Sea sand from Clovelly or Hartland was added to wet soil. This cost 30/- to £3 to carry enough for an acre a distance of two miles. For it to reach further inland the expenditure would be greater. Some of the common pests mentioned by Vancouver include wire-worm in roots of wheat in March, grubs, rodents and rust or mildew on wheat.

Temperature readings collected in Ilfracombe in 1808 ranged from an average of 48½ degrees Fahrenheit in February to a seemingly low 66 degrees in August. Inland parishes would escape the worst of the sea mists and benefit from what Vancouver called the "mild and salubrious" climate in the area round the Taw and Torridge. Here, vegetation was often two to three weeks in advance of parishes closer to Exmoor. Snow was rare and that which there was seldom settled for more than a few hours.

Crops and Woods

The main cereal crop was wheat, which would be hand reaped by men and bound by the women. Barley and oats were also grown. Other crops were turnips, hog peas (for feeding livestock), beans, tares (a vetch), potatoes and clover.

The oak woodlands were being depleted for local shipbuilding and were not being replenished. The increased demand for ships during the Napoleonic Wars, led to a shortage of timber. Ash trees were found and coppices of birch, willow, elder, hazel and wild cherry were cut on a twenty two year rotation, which seems very infrequent and suggests that larger trees were required. Parishioners would collect firewood from the moor or, if this was too far, they would use wood from the copses and hedgerows. The cost of 100 faggots of wood was 13/6. The poorest residents would collect cow and horse dung from areas such as Northam Burrows, this would be dried and burned.

Livestock

Most farms were mixed, with crops and livestock. Red Ruby Devon cattle were kept for beef, milking and ploughing. Ideally the calves were born between February and May and weaned at two to three weeks old. They would then be fed with milk, mixed with gruel made from boiled flax seeds. Ploughing oxen would be broken to the yoke at the age of two or three and had a two to three year working life. In 1808, dairy cattle cost nine to ten guineas per cow. Each cow might yield 6½lb of butter per week for six months after calving. Beef steers would be sold on at four or five years old to graziers on the Somerset levels. They would then be fattened for the markets of Bath, Bristol and London. The Barnstaple cattle fair, held in mid-September, was noted as the best in the district. There was also a fair in Great Torrington.

Most of the sheep were Exmoors although cross-breeding was already being tried and some were crossed with merinos. Pigs too were cross-bred and fed on potatoes and barley meal. Most farms also had dove-cots in order to breed pigeons. The horses that were used were usually of the size of a larger pack animal or smaller cart horse and would be expected to work an eight or nine hour day. They were put out to grass in the summer. In winter they would need feeding on coarse hay and oats. Donkeys were also used and cost from 15/- to

30/- each. Although horses might be kept for riding, as well as pulling farm machinery, it would be rare for these animals to pull a conveyance such as a cart or carriage. The state of Devon's roads, at this point not macadamised,³ made the use of wheeled traffic very difficult. Pack horses were equipped with panniers, large baskets that were slung either side. Alternatively, they might pull a wooden sledge that resembled a native American travois. Where the terrain and road surface allowed, a one or two horse cart might carry 8-12cwt (400-600kg) but it is unlikely that this would have been possible on the hills of parts of North Devon.

Tools

Farmers in this area favoured Dorset swing ploughs. At 8lb, these were lighter than some models. Ploughs made by "hedgerow carpenters" cost 15/-, including the iron blades. Heavy drag harrows, requiring four to six oxen to pull, were used, as were one or two horse rollers and drills that might be hand or horse drawn. Another machine in use was the scarifier, known as "the tormenter". Hand tools included the traditional Devon paring shovel, pitch forks and reaping hooks.

Threshing machines represented a significant outlay. At forty guineas they were for the large estates rather than the average farmer. They required four horses to pull and six people to work; the labourers, driving the horse, gathering the sheaves, feeding and clearing the machine and combing and binding the wheat straw. In this way, they could produce six bushels an hour. Oats and barley only needed five men as they were not combed and output was nine bushels an hour.

Labour

Farm labourers were usually engaged at Christmas to serve from Lady Day (25th March) to the day before the following Lady Day. In North Devon there was a strong tradition of farm service, whereby teenaged boys and girls would live-in with the farmer for whom they were working. It was believed that it was easier to train workers if they were on the premises. Those who occupied property worth ten guineas a year or more had to take parish apprentices, who would be selected by the overseers of the poor and would be boarded at the farm and be taught 'husbandry' or 'housewifery'. Although the system could work well,

providing a form of foster care and training for those whose families were too poor to support them, these children could be as young as three. The system was open to enormous abuse as no checks were made on the children. Vancouver expressed doubts about the wisdom of young children, especially girls, working with heavy tools.⁴

Labourers and farm servants often changed employer frequently but usually remained within a few miles' radius. Outdoor labourers might earn 7/- a week with two or three pints of beer or cider per day. On smaller farms the weekly pay could be as little as 3/6. Labourers might also be given an allowance of wheat in order to make bread. Farm labourers' cottages were usually surrounded by twenty perches (1/8 of an acre or 500 sq metres) of manured land for growing potatoes. A carter or head man could earn £10 a year plus his board and lodging, as well as having his clothes washed. Men who were hired by the day earned 20d, with half rate for women and 8d a day for boys. Day labourers at harvest time might work for food and board only but would expect to be invited to Christmas celebrations that could last several days. It was stated that wages had remained static for the last fourteen years, during which time prices had doubled.

The working day stretched from 7.00am to 5.00pm or 6.00pm, depending on the season, with an hour for lunch. During this time, an expected output might be spreading forty heaps of dung or lime, or producing 100 faggots⁵ of firewood.

Vancouver commented on the morals of farm servants mentioning,

“the general profligacy which seems now to prevail amongst them, (which) proceeds in a great degree from the almost total neglect of their morals growing up”. In contrast, he also wrote of, “an openness of heart and mildness of character in the inhabitants of Devonshire.... A general urbanity of manners and desire to please and meet the wishes of the stranger, prevail among all classes of the community.”⁶

There were few employment options beyond agriculture or trades, such as carpentry and shoemaking. Other industries in the region included shipbuilding and pottery in Bideford. River silting at Bideford and Barnstaple was making the ports less useable, with a detrimental effect on trade. Woollen manufacture on the common at Torrington was

already in decline. Compared to the south of the county, where lace making prevailed, there was a lack of occupational opportunities for women in North Devon, with glove-making providing the main alternative to domestic service.

One of the problems for farmers in the Torridge district was an insufficiency of labour and capital making it difficult to carry out improvements. Vancouver said that lack of progress was not due to ignorance as was perceived but “the farmer has by far too much at stake, to be easily seduced from the course of husbandry pursued by his forefathers”;⁷ in other words, he was unwilling to take risks. The survey advised that North Devon needed an Agricultural Society to encourage farmers to make improvements and it also advocated crop rotation.

Poverty

With food prices rising, those needing poor relief were on the increase. Bacon was 5d a lb and potatoes between 8d and 1/- a bushel. A table in the agricultural survey suggests that Hartland had raised £727 14s 2d from poor and other rates, which equated to 3s 4d in the pound; lower than many other parishes in the area who levied rates between 1s 8½d and 12s 10½d in the pound. The annual cost of maintaining the Hartland parish workhouse was £164 3s 4d. Other expenditure amounted to £485 11s 6¼d. £2 19s 8d had been spent on law suits and removing paupers back to their own parishes so they could be supported there. Sometimes this system of returning paupers back to their parish of settlement was more expensive than providing them with relief but on principle, no one would consider helping someone who was not their own. In total, Hartland spent £852 14s 6¼d on their poor and an additional £107 19s 9¾d was spent on repairs to the church, highways and bridges and maintaining the militia. There was a Friendly Society in Hartland, with one hundred members, who would pay in small sums regularly in order to receive help when they were ill or for funeral expenses. Presumably these figures relate to the year 1807.

Notes

1. This was reprinted in facsimile form in 1969 by David and Charles.
2. A measure of capacity equal to eight gallons or approximately thirty six and a half

litres. This article refers to pre-decimal currency, when there were twelve pence (d) in a shilling and twenty shillings in a pound. Six shillings would be written 6/-.

3. John Loudon Macadam did not put forward his ideas for improved road surfaces until the 1810s.

4. Vancouver, Charles, *General View of the Agriculture of Devon: With Observations on the Means of its Improvement, Drawn up for the Consideration of the Board of Agriculture* David and Charles, Newton Abbott (1969) Folding map, plates, folding tables, xii + 479pp. (originally published 1808) p. 134.

5. The old term for a bundle of wood.

6. Vancouver.

7. Vancouver.