

## FOUR CENTURIES OF CHESHIRE FARMING SYSTEMS, 1500-1900

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THERE are records of the goodness of Cheshire cheese for nearly a thousand years, but some of the earliest are a trifle legendary. Having been a dairy and cheese-making county for so long it is one of the few counties where farming changed very little between Tudor and Victorian days, but that does not mean either that methods have always been the same or that the same area was occupied by farm land four and a half centuries ago. Wide areas have been reclaimed from the wild here as elsewhere.

Marling was a method of fertilising the soil practised by the Romans. It is believed to have fallen out of use in this country during the Middle Ages, but not in Cheshire. When Leland travelled in Shropshire, Cheshire and Lancashire he found marl was used to ameliorate the poor sandy soils in those three counties, and in particular noticed the amazingly good results round Mr. Spurstow's house in Cheshire where he saw "marvellous good corne and pastures". At Mr. Booth's place there "by good culture is made veri good corne ground, wher sometime was very ferny and commune ground",<sup>(1)</sup> so already some farmers, or landowners of Cheshire were, all unwittingly no doubt, in the forefront of the advanced farming of their day. This was perhaps because farms in Cheshire were largely reclaimed from scrub woodland, peat moss or marsh, or some hill land on the border of Derby. This is confirmed by Gray's conclusion that nowhere in the county was there grouping of strips by fields as in the Midlands, and nowhere is there found mention of rights of pasture over a fallow field. The county was indeed largely enclosed in the sixteenth century, presumably by direct assarting or land reclamation of waste; it was almost entirely enclosed by the eighteenth century. The fact that there were open fields near Chester may only indicate that the religious set them out when the cathedral was built. The thirteenth century documents that Gray examined gave no indication that the selions were ever grouped by fields. Even then the abbotts were buying, exchanging and consolidating parcels of land and these exchanges meant a field system that was not rigid, but which easily allowed consolidation and enclosure.<sup>(2)</sup>

Too much importance can be attached to the Celtic influence that may have reached across the Welsh border, but clearly wild grass

<sup>(1)</sup> Cited in H. C. Darby, *An Hist. Geog. of England before 1800* (1936), p. 346.

<sup>(2)</sup> H. L. Gray, *English Field Systems* (1915), pp. 253-258.

grazing is more readily amenable to fencing for individual use and development than the strips of open field arable land over which there are common rights of pasture at certain seasons of the year.<sup>(3)</sup> And the new tendencies and possibilities which had opened up for farmers in the sixteenth century argue that the more enclosed state of the great dairy districts, discovered when the epoch of private enclosure acts began, is to be attributed to activities then. It meant the enclosure of rich pasture and valley land, of which there was and is so much in Cheshire, but which required much clearing of thorn bush and scrub hardwoods, and some kind of draining before its use became practical and profitable.

Within the belt of closer settlement that stretched across England from the Wash to the Bristol Channel and Southampton, woods and fens and downs imposed limits to villages and manors with open arable fields. Outside that area there was arable of course, but much less in proportion to total area, scattered and often different in type. As new land previously inaccessible was brought into cultivation, either for tillage, for grazing or for hay, the open field arrangements were not necessarily made and were a little unlikely in the more remote counties. Its inconveniences were already manifest<sup>(4)</sup> both to the practical farmer who had to work the land, and to the contemporary writers of textbooks, like Fitzherbert, who belonged to a Derbyshire family, and Tusser whose knowledge was that of East Anglia. In such counties as Cheshire if there was a common field at all it was often away from the village and formed an adjunct to, rather than a basis of life, providing the bread corn that the local inhabitants must consume while their livestock provided the cash crop, and this is confirmed by the evidence of such terriers and surveys as Gray was able to examine.

The College of St. John the Baptist at Chester had at least five tenant's holdings of twenty enclosed selions in various fields in 1548-9. Nearly a century later there was a small open field of about sixty acres at Handbridge just outside the city, and the dean and chapter of Chester held lands, including several closes without Northgate, most parcels of which were not said to be in open fields, although some were in Chester townfield and lower townfield. At Daverham and Great Budworth all the tenants occupied closes in 1650, and a 1612 great survey of Macclesfield, which gives details of nine townships, contains scarcely a suggestion of open field arable except a few perhaps unusual parcels at Bollington. Apart from these the entire manor lay in small closes of from one to two acres and these were largely arable. The glebe at Bowden was leased to eight tenants in 1654, each with a messuage including two cottages. The six held for the most part a series of closes, but four

<sup>(3)</sup> W. H. R. Curtler, *Enclosure and Redistribution of our Land* (1920), pp. 135, 194.

<sup>(4)</sup> E. C. K. Gonnor, *Common Land and Enclosure* (1912), pp. 121, 142.

had lands or strips in Eyebrookes, Church Field and Hall Field amounting to less than one-third of each leasehold. Eyebrookes was a close, and may have been shared by the four. Hall and Church Field were "upon the Downes" and may have been recently improved and fenced, and are unlikely to have been normal open fields.<sup>(5)</sup>

There was a dispute, possibly one of many, about the enclosure of waste at Church Hulme in 1538 when Sir Robert Needham brought a complaint in the courts, setting out that all of his ancestors had been seised of the manor of Church Hulme, Chester, and of certain waste grounds belonging thereto until of late when certain persons, *i.e.* Thomas Jackson, Rauff Jackson, Ricard Wishall, Edmund Jackson, John Smith and four more, had entered the waste ground and enclosed divers acres and taken them to their own use. Edmund Jackson answered that he was the tenant of John Cotton of Cotton, gentleman, one of the lords of the waste ground, and the rest made similar answers. The end of the story, if that is not it, is not told.

The Richard Wishall who was party to this dispute lived at Leighs in the county of Chester and died early in the reign of James I. The inventory of his goods dated July 1604 includes sixteen cattle, two oxen, two steers, five kine, two bullocks and one cow stirk, one heifer and three calves, which formed a small dairy herd. He had two mares and one horse colt, twenty-three sheep, two hogs and two shoots. Corn in the field included wheat and rye, barley and oats; corn in the house included French wheat (buckwheat?), barley, malt, beans and oats. Unfortunately no quantities are stated so no closer guess at the farming can be made than that it may have been on a 4-course rotation of fallow; wheat; beans and peas; oats and barley or some such thing. There was flesh in the house, doubtless dried or smoked beef, possibly mutton hams, and there was a store of butter and cheese, perhaps waiting to be sold. There were twelve hives of bees, and an unspecified quantity and kind of poultry. He occupied one meadow, two closes and half a tack of ground, but of dimensions there are none. He used ploughs, harrows, waggons and carts, and oddments like yokes and churns are mentioned, so he may have used his two oxen for ploughing. Another member of the family, possibly his successor, Alexander Wishall of Leighs, died about a decade later. His inventory was made in 1616. He had four cows, two heifers and three calves, a rather smaller dairy, and only one hog and one shoot. He only had one mare, so perhaps he did his ploughing with a mixed team of cows and the mare to lead. He had corn in the house, wheat four "hoopes", barley "10 hoopes", malt "six hoopes" and tack of two closes for seven years *etc.*, so it is even less possible to deduce how he farmed than it was how Richard did.<sup>(6)</sup>

<sup>(5)</sup> Gray, *op. cit.*, pp. 249-251. See also TRANSACTIONS, Vol. CIV, pp. 35-59.

<sup>(6)</sup> James Wishaw, *A History of the Wishaw family* (1935), pp. 23, 57, 61.

## II

Toward the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, William Smith wrote a description of the county, *The Vale Royal of England*, and in 1656 when Cromwell was interested in England's rural prosperity, this book with additions was published by W. Webb. It gives us a pretty complete picture of Cheshire farming in Tudor and Stuart times, and, if we can believe all it says, the title, *Vale Royal* was no misnomer.

The configuration of the land itself has not, of course, changed during the three hundred intervening years, but reclamation and improvement have altered its appearances in some places. The description "it lyeth low, nevertheless very pleasant and abounding in all things needful and necessary for men's use . . . most places flat and even, yet it has certain Hills. . . . It aboundeth chiefly in Arable, Pasture, Meadow, and Woodland, Waters, Heaths and Mosses", is fairly applicable today, although the heaths and mosses have so largely been reclaimed. The heaths were common then, "so that they may serve for Cattel to feed on, especially Sheep and Horses, a good help for the poorer sort. Out of the Mosses they dig Turves every Summer every man as shall serve his turn to burn all the year . . . the next is Inclosed Ground both for Pasture and Tillage, which bringeth forth Corn in great quantity, especially Wheat and Rye (which they sowe in September and so layeth in the Ground all Winter); also Oats and Barley, Beans, Pease, Fitches, French buckwheat and such like. The pasture ground is reserved, especially, for their Kine (for their Sheep and Horses commonly go upon the Commone). The cause for keeping so many Kine is, as well for breeding of Cattel as for their milk wherewith (beside that which they spend in their houses) they make great store both of Butter and Cheese". There was for that day big business in butter and cheese in this and the neighbouring counties. Cheese was shipped from the Dee and the Mersey and sent round the coast to London, and the London cheesemongers had factories and warehouses in the county. Butter also went across country as far as Uttoxeter, a great market for that product.<sup>(7)</sup>

Besides this trade there were young stock and out-worked oxen to be disposed of, and a thriving business was driven in what we should call "stores" as well as "fat beasts". "Their Young Cattel, which they breed and bring up (their own turn being served) they bring the next to the Market to sell, and many times are brought up as far as London, and further by Graziers, who buy them there; and feeding them a certain time, do sell them again. . . . Their oxen are very large and big of bone and altogether with fair and long horns, so that a man shall find divers, whose horns at the tips are more than three feet wide or asunder; with which Oxen, they do all

<sup>(7)</sup> See G. E. Fussell, "Traffic in Farm Produce in the seventeenth century," *Agric. Hist.*, Vol. 20 (1946).

labour, as Tillage of their ground, Carting of their Corn, Hey, Turves and Wood and some come to London, with their Waynes laden with Salt. They keep their Oxen all the Winter time in house, but not their Kine, as they do in some other Counties". As they were so fully occupied with their dairies and their cattle breeding "they keep nothing so many Sheep as in other Counties, because their Ground serveth better to other purpose; for commonly they keep but so many, as to serve in their own house for provision and to sell to the Butcher and that the wool thereof may suffice to make apparel for their Household. Of which Sheep some have horns and some have not. Some are all black and the wool thereof being spun and woven into cloth or Kersey, as it is undyed, is not black but more like brown, such as we call, a Sheepe Russet". John Leigh of Steperly Park, Adlington, possessed a flock of unusual sheep larger than most others, and having a hairy rather than a woolly fleece. They had four horns, some of extraordinary size. Leigh could not determine whether they were a cross between goats and sheep or not. The flesh was agreeable enough, but different from other mutton, yet more like mutton than goat's flesh. Whatever they were, they were much more a curiosity than a breed characteristic of the county, and may perhaps be compared to the modern herd of wild white cattle at Chillingham Park. Because they used oxen for draught, horses played a small part in the farm economy. "Horses and Mares they keep but not so many as to serve their turn, to ride on or to carry Corn to the Mill; (Howbeit, in most places Millers have Carriers, which fetch the Corn, and when it is ground do bring it home again). As for Horses and Mares to draw, they use not any, but only one or two, at the most, to go before their Oxen; except in some certain places and that is commonly amongst them that dwell on Sandy ground". This mixed team for ploughing and draught was very ancient, and was praised by Walter of Henley as long ago as the thirteenth century. Poultry of all sorts was bred in large numbers, and Webb was convinced that they were much better and cheaper than in the south of England. There was a wide variety of fruit in their orchards.

By farming along these lines Cheshire men were becoming well-to-do, as is shown by a note made on a survey of lands in Moore Hundred in Cheshire in 1628. The tenants were copyholders "but have each of them lately bought out their owne lands to hold in fee farme in free and common socage."<sup>(8)</sup> And they continued in their good habits; a lease of some of the Wishall lands dated 1647 contains a licence to dig marl pits.<sup>(9)</sup>

In spite of their accessibility to ideas and their comparatively advanced farming, the Cheshire farmers had in the beginning of the seventeenth century, or possibly a little earlier, only begun to

<sup>(8)</sup> Harl M.S. 2010, cited in Mildred Campbell, *The English Yeoman* (1942), p. 144.

<sup>(9)</sup> Wishaw, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

build the characteristic timber-framed houses that are so conspicuous a part of the landscape today. Webb, who probably copied verbatim from Smith's account, wrote "The Building and Furniture of their Houses, till of late years they used the old manner of the Saxons; for they had their fires in the midst of the house, against a Hob of Clay and their Oxen under the same Roof but within these forty years it is altogether altered; so that they have builded chimneys and furnished other parts of their houses accordingly". The seventeenth century geographers are not specially informative about the county. Both Camden and Speed rely upon Ranulph, the monk of Chester, for the report that the county was rich in corn, cattle and fish, especially salmon: Speed added that the soil was fruitful and yielded good meadow and pastures. The cheese was, of course, remarked upon. Edward Leigh waxed quite lyrical about it in the mid-century. "The Grasse and Fodder there is of that goodness and vertue that Cheeses are made there in great number of a most pleasing and delicate taste, such as all England again affordeth not the like, no though the best dairy women otherwise and skillfullest in Cheese-making be had from hence".<sup>(10)</sup> Blome sings the praises of the cheese, butter and cattle twenty-five years later, and Morden after another three decades makes similar remarks, adding that he calculated from the number of houses, 24,054, there were about 164,324 inhabitants, or one to four acres.<sup>(11)</sup> Toward the end of the century Ralph Thoresby, the famous topographer and antiquary, travelled from Bowden to Northwich and thence through the Forest of Delamere to Tarvin, "through a most pleasant vale abounding with woods and fruitful pastures, which produces the famous Cheshire cheese".<sup>(12)</sup>

Soil amelioration continued to be the Cheshire farmers' main pre-occupation. They practised all the then known expedients with assiduity. A contemporary divides the soil into three types. "The *Black Earth* is commonly a rich pasture, or Meadowing, or good Corne Land; the *Foxglove Earth* . . . is generally good pasture and by Improvements brings plentiful Harvests of Corn; the *Clay Earth* is chiefly for Corn . . . these *Earths* are usually improved either by Marle, Dung, Lime, Shellfishes, Shells, Rags, Mud, Hare's or Rabbit's skins, Sope-makers' Ashes, Seaweed and the Common Dirt of the Lanes, or putrify'd Ferns. The Marles where there is good depth of Soil, are usually the Best Improvement; and indeed a good Marling is often counted equal to the Purchase of the Land."<sup>(13)</sup> The Cheshire men reckoned that there were six sorts of marl, but these were really variants of the same material, and probably

<sup>(10)</sup> Edward Leigh, *England Described* (1659), p. 42.

<sup>(11)</sup> R. Blome, *Britannia* (1673); R. Morden, *Description of England* (1704), p. 17.

<sup>(12)</sup> D. H. Atkinson, *Ralph Thoresby, the topographer; his town and his times* (1885).

<sup>(13)</sup> Charles Leigh, *The Natural History of Lancashire, Cheshire and the Peak in Derbyshire* (1700), p. 55.

justified the old saw that applied pretty well to Cheshire, Derby and Stafford. It runs:—

That he that Marls Sand may buy land,  
He that Marls Moss shall suffer no loss,  
But he that Marls Clay flings all away.

John Edmunds of Bowden improved some Marsh land, very flat, "full of rushes, a deep black mould such as was customarily used for cutting turf for fuel". He laid six hundred cartloads of a hot red sand dug on Bowden Downs that in its natural situation bore nothing but fern and short grass, upon a Cheshire acre and sowed oats and fitches (vetches). He got what he considered an extraordinary crop but does not say how much. The next winter he dunged it well and got sixteen loads of natural hay. This improvement had lasted for twenty-four years without any further treatment. Edmunds reckoned the rentable value had risen from 10/- an acre to £6, and that he could have two crops of hay from it if he could be sure of weather to make it. He also breast-ploughed the turf on some of the marsh, burnt it, spread the ashes while hot, ploughed them up, and sowed as soon as he possibly could. He was then able to take two successive crops of barley and one of oats. After this he laid the land down and had good grass for three or four years. Then aquatic plants began to show up again, and he was forced to repeat the process. Another process of the early eighteenth century was to let out the water of the salt-springs upon the land after rain. This was thought a great improvement, especially on lands troubled with worms,<sup>(14)</sup> but it is not clear how this was done. It may perhaps have been by a sort of water meadow, or by means of irrigation ditches.

Many people had sung the praises of Cheshire pastures and the cheeses produced from them; few were so eloquent as Defoe whose pangyric deserves quotation in full. It runs:

"This county however remote from London, is one of those which contributes most to its support, as well as to several other parts of England, and that is by its excellent cheese, which they make here in such quantities; and so exceedingly good that . . . the City of London alone takes off 14,000 ton every year besides 8,000 ton which they say goes every year down the rivers Severn and Trent the former to Bristol, and the latter to York; including all the large towns on both these large rivers. And besides the quantity ship'd both here, and at Liverpool, to go to Ireland and Scotland. So that the quantity of cheese made in this country must be prodigious great. Indeed the whole county is employed in it, and part of its neighbourhood too; for tho' tis call'd by the name of Cheshire Cheese, yet great quantities of it are made in Shropshire, Staffordshire and Lancashire, that is to say on such parts of them as border upon Cheshire. The soil is extraordinarily good, and the grass they say, has a peculiar richness in it, which disposes the creatures to give a great quantity of milk, and that being very sweet and good; and this cheese manufacture, for such it is, increases every day, and greatly enriches all the county; raises the value of the lands and encourages the farmers to the keeping of vast stocks of cows; the very number of the cattle improving and enriching the land".<sup>(15)</sup>

<sup>(14)</sup> J. Mortimer, *The Whole Art of Husbandry* (4th ed., 1716), Vol. I, pp. 87, 101, 102, 123.

<sup>(15)</sup> *Tour* (Everyman ed.), Vol. II, p. 72.

Only the last sentence of this is doubtful because large quantities of phosphates must have been carried away in the milk products and these needed continuous replacement. This may have accounted for the Cheshire and neighbouring counties devotion to marl, which so impressed the contemporary didactic farming writers, but which was so much more ancient than they realised. It was very heavily applied, and later in the county's history the marl pits which reduced the area of so many fields had to be filled up, work that was then deemed an improvement. So much as an hundred loads an acre was being applied in the eighteenth century and was indeed said to make a new soil,<sup>(16)</sup> which may have been an effective counter measure against the losses resulting from grazing and selling off milk products.

The account book of Thomas Furber, who entered the family farm at Austersen Hall near Nantwich in 1767, though it does not state the acreage, does record the stock he bought. It was twenty cows and one bull, six two-year olds and four yearlings as dairy stock. He only required two horses, but he bought fifteen sheep, two swine and two "pigins". All these livestock cost £223 10s. 0d. The implements were, so far as I can judge, two ploughs, ironing harrows, a "suck mould", a cart, a tumbrel and a variety of dairy utensils. The implements cost £23 18s. 7½d., and the dairy appliances £13 3s. 6d. He also bought hay at 25s. a cwt., oats, beans, rye, peas and muncorn (maslin a mixture of rye and wheat), rye grass and clover seed amounting together to £23 10s. 1d. Judging from this and his sales he grew some wheat and oats on about 10 acres, but no potatoes or roots.<sup>(17)</sup>

A year or two later Arthur Young passed through the county. He found that the farmers about Knutsford grew a trifling quantity of wheat, but were increasing their arable by growing more barley for sale to the new malt-kilns at Manchester set up in competition with those of Yorkshire. Clover was sown with the barley and mown twice, yielding two and a half tons at the first and one ton at the second cut, a good yield. Potatoes were grown and yielded about 500 bushels an acre. Many of the great dairy farmers kept their cows like running horses, littered down as well and constantly fed with ground oats, but the cows, a mongrel breed between the Longhorn and the Shorthorn were small, and would not fatten above thirty-two stone. Inevitably marl and lime were used for manure.<sup>(18)</sup> In 1795 Aikin estimated that three-quarters of the county was pastured or mown, only one-fourth being ploughed, the course on heavy clays being four years' crops, *i.e.* oats, fallow,

<sup>(16)</sup> William Ellis, *Modern Husbandman* (1750), Vol. 2 (May) p. 66: Richard North, *An account of the different kind of grasses propagated in England* (1759), p. 23: John Mills, *A New and complete system of practical husbandry* (1762), pp. 36-38: Thomas Hale, *Compleat Body of Husbandry* (1764), p. 47.

<sup>(17)</sup> W. B. Mercer, "Two centuries of Cheshire cheese farming," *Jour. R.A.S.E.* (1937), pp. 64-67.

<sup>(18)</sup> *A Six Month's Tour through the North of England* (2nd ed., 1773), Vol. III, pp. 242-249.

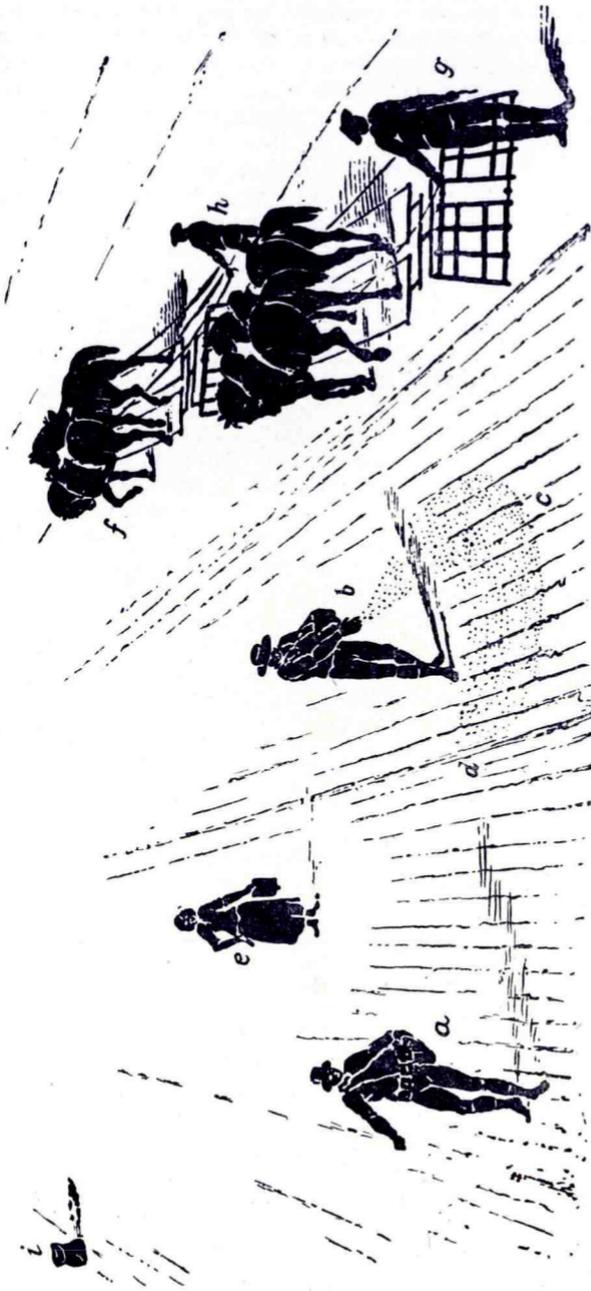


PLATE 5 : BROADCASTING SEED BY HAND AND HARROWING IN.

From Henry Stephens' *Book of the Farm*, 1877. Though this picture is less than a hundred years old it shows how grain sowing was done for many previous centuries

- a Leading hand-sower
- b Second hand-sower
- c Elliptical form of the cast of seed
- d Open furrow between the two ridges
- e Field-worker for carrying seed to the sowers
- f Sack of seed-wheat
- f Leading pair of horses
- h Leading pair of harrows
- g Following-man with his pair of horses and harrows

wheat, oats, and then laid down with clover and grass seeds and pastured for five or six years before being broken up again. Green crops as winter food for cattle were seldom grown, but in the north of the county a good deal of attention was given to potatoes and carrots for the market provided by the manufacturing districts of Lancashire. The sandy land was ploughed only for three years and then went back to grass, although it sometimes bore a crop a year. Wedge at this date estimated there were only a thousand acres of common field in the county, but several considerable tracts of waste land had recently been enclosed; other waste enclosures were in contemplation.<sup>(19)</sup>

Ralph Basford entered upon Stowford Farm, Weston, Crewe, as a newly married man, possibly in succession to his father. The farm comprised 120 acres. He kept a day book. Dr. Mercer<sup>(20)</sup> estimated from his figures that while here he grew on an average 15–20 acres of wheat, 20–25 acres of oats and barley, and 15–20 acres of hay each year. He presumed 10–15 acres fallow, and 30–40 acres grazed. A herd of twenty cows and pigs were fed. Basford stayed here till 1804 when he moved to Church Farm, Barthomley, a holding estimated at 210 acres. Practically the whole of this farm was ploughable, and most of it was ploughed during the next fifteen years, except the meadows. Some turnips were grown. The herd was increased here to twenty-five cows, and a threshing machine was installed in 1812. Implements were home-made, and the inevitable marl was dug on the farm and spread on its surface. A little lime was bought. Pigs did not amount to much nor did sheep. Dr. Mercer attempted to calculate the financial profit on these farms and estimated that £145 a year was cleared at Stowford on the average from 1800 to 1802, but only £50 profit was made at Church Farm on an average from 1814 to 1816. This is probably explained by the proportionately higher rent and rates on the larger farm.

There was still at this time a good deal of uncultivated land in the county, chiefly forests, hills and peat moors, though there was much activity in reclaiming land in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Delamere Forest still covered 10,000 acres of unprofitable land despite sporadic enclosures. There was a lot of waste land on the Baulesfield Hills near the Derbyshire border, and at Rudheath in Northwich Hundred.

Some farmers had by 1808 adopted the comparatively new Roth-erham plough, while others used double-furrow ploughs. Several farmers used a mole plough for field drainage. The harrows were ordinary, but the spikey roller and rollers with knives were used for cutting up soddy or tough fallows; other rollers were made

<sup>(19)</sup> John Aikin, *A Description of the Country . . . round Manchester* (1795), pp. 44, 46: see also *The Traveller's Companion from Holyhead to London* (1793), pp. 95, 96, 100, 105. Thomas Wedge, *General View . . . Agric. . . . Chester* (1794), pp. 16–22.

<sup>(20)</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 72 ff.

of wood or stone as they had been for ages all over the kingdom. Where turnips were drilled either Knight's drill-barrow or the Northumberland drill was used. Waggons, carts and sleds were used for transport, and threshing machines had become common on the larger farms.

The management of the arable farms, those where rather more than a quarter of the area was cropped, did not change much. There was little corn drilling, and the rotation was usually a few years of corn crops, mainly wheat and oats the latter being emphasised, followed by some years ley. Oats, oats, oats, or oats, barley, oats or fallow, or an occasional crop of wheat was the system. On the moss land heavy crops of potatoes were grown. There was probably no part of the kingdom where this crop was so general as some parts of Cheshire and Lancashire. Round Frodsham it was estimated that 100,000 bushels of 90 lb. were produced annually, the acreable yield being so much as 250 bushels, or a trifle over 10 tons, but this may have been an optimistic estimate judging by modern standards. The produce was sold to the manufacturing districts in South Lancashire. For the same market peas, beans and onions were grown near Altrincham. The potatoes were heavily manured with dung and seaweed. The natural grass was very rich in the alluvial land from the river floods, but clover had been neglected in the county in the seventeenth century when it was fairly widely grown in Stafford and Worcester. By the early nineteenth century red clover or honeysuckle trefoil was much used for laying land down combined with ray or rye grass and various other "seeds". Vetch was cultivated widely. Marl and lime continued to be important manures. Dung was often composted with soil from the sides of lanes and with gutter sweepings. Sand was put on the clay. Bone dust was too scarce to be used, but some few farmers used rape dust.

The cows were of all breeds. The calves for herd replacement were weaned at three weeks and fed on whey, buttermilk, oatmeal, etc. The milch kine were housed in November and fed on wheat, barley and oat-straw, hay and crushed roots; green crops were used for stall feeding. One of the most important innovations was the use of turnips for winter feed by some farmers. About three acres were estimated to be required to keep a cow, and the average product of cheese 300lb. a cow. The young cattle were sold to the feeding counties for fattening. No particular attention was paid to the horses, and only a few gentlemen used oxen for draught. Hogs were fed by the dairy farmers.

Cheshire landlords and farmers had not followed the fashion and formed an agricultural society as their neighbours had in Manchester, at Newcastle-under-Lyme in Stafford, and at Drayton in Salop. A few intelligent gentlemen and farmers at Weaverham, near Northwich, started an experimental farm. They carried it on for a few years, demonstrating methods of draining and other improvements, and introducing new breeds of cattle and sheep, but



PLATE 6 : MILKING TIME: A DAIRY FARM IN 1801  
*Art Journal* 1862 p. 170

found it such a losing, expensive concern that they were obliged to abandon it.<sup>(21)</sup>

When prices collapsed at the end of the French Wars, Cheshire, like other grazing and dairying counties, did not suffer so much as the arable districts. Very few or no farms were vacant in the early part of 1816, though landlords had been obliged to reduce rents by some 20%, and Joseph Fenna of Baddiley thought the horse tax a handicap. The cheese-making farms had not then been disturbed though prices were falling, but where the grass had been ploughed out under the enthusiasm promoted by the high war prices for corn, some distress was being felt. The average dairy farm ran with little expense, according to George Wilbraham of Northwich, though the new trade in imported cheese from Holland was "a nuisance", a none too emphatic word.<sup>(22)</sup>

Generally Cheshire farming was much the same in the late 1820's though some increase in the vegetable growing for Lancashire may have taken place. Potatoes indeed were first in the rotations, followed by oats, barley, wheat and seeds. Soap waste and ash was used extensively for manure, but Kennedy and Grainger's remark that lime was not so much used as formerly, marl being substituted for it is incomprehensible. Paring and burning was practised. Soil mixing, sand on clay, clay on sand, was common. A good deal of hollow draining continued to be done, bricks and stones being used as a filling. Cabbages were grown for cattle. Nothing new had been introduced in the management of livestock.<sup>(23)</sup>

William Williams, who farmed some 200 acres on the Cheshire-Staffordshire borders from 1812 to 1829 has recorded that 1821 was a very bad harvest, a quarter of the corn rotting in the fields. He had to grind up a large proportion of his wheat crop for feeding to the pigs. Again in 1826 it was very dry and every crop failed. Wheat was then the best, but he gathered no turnips or clover or hay, and the barley and oats were so light that the cows had little but water to live on. He had about 60 or 80 acres arable, and a herd of thirty to forty milch kine. He bred his own herd replacements, only buying an occasional bull or breeding heifer, and drafting out six to eight cows a year. He also had a small flock of sheep and a few pigs; but besides his farming William was a cheese factor and doubtless this activity was a profitable part of his undertaking.<sup>(24)</sup>

The importation of cheese from Holland, which already competed and depressed the price of Cheshire cheese, was augmented by the introduction of the Steam Packet between Dublin and Liverpool. This rapid means of transport made it possible to kill beasts and sheep in Dublin for shipment to Liverpool market, and by so much

<sup>(21)</sup> Henry Holland, *General View of the Agric. . . . of Chester* (1808), *passim*.

<sup>(22)</sup> *Agricultural State of the Kingdom* (1816).

<sup>(23)</sup> J. C. Loudon, *Encyclopaedia of Agric.* (1825): Kennedy and Grainger, *Ibid.* (1828).

<sup>(24)</sup> Mercer, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-79

reduced the possible sales of cast dairy stock and bullocks from the Cheshire dairy farms and their small flocks of sheep. The farmers found this competition very irksome because they had not entirely escaped the consequences of the post-war depression which had affected them particularly from 1820 to 1823 and again in the 'thirties. Some, but very little reduction in rents had been made, although the staple produce of the Cheshire farmers had fallen some 25% in its selling price. The total effect of all this upon the farmers was "very sad". Many of them were faced with ruin, and the year 1833 was looked forward to with the greatest apprehension.

This bleak sketch of conditions was drawn by Joseph Lee of Malpas, who was a land agent and valuer of fifty years' experience in the county, when he gave evidence before the *Select Committee in Distress in Agriculture* in June 1833. Unfortunately the Committee was more interested in the problem of grain production than other branches of farming, so Lee does not disclose a great deal about the dairy farmers or their methods, the subject of predominant interest in Cheshire. He does not repeat what was commonly said that many farmers had contracted extravagant personal habits during the prosperous years of the war, which they were very reluctant to abandon. The size of Cheshire farms and their probable range of net profit renders that easy commonplace, true as it may have been of the occupiers of the great sheep-arable farms of Eastern England, unlikely in relation to Cheshire men whose holdings were so much smaller. An example is made of the comparatively few yeomen in the county. Such men, tempted by the high prices of the war, had borrowed money to improve their small properties and were faced with ruin when the depression set in. Land had been bought dear, often on 50% mortgage; the decline in values made the property only worth the mortgage, so that the owner was obliged to sell out, generally to a neighbouring large landowner.

The wheat yield on the wet heavy clays of Cheshire was below the national average of the day. Lee estimated it at twenty bushels. At the very best it was from twenty-four to twenty-eight, and more rarely thirty-two. Against this there was a good deal of 12<sup>s</sup> land only producing twelve to sixteen bushels an acre, a yield that was common enough five hundred years before, but was certainly uneconomic in the early nineteenth century. The wet clays were rapidly going out of cultivation under these conditions as was natural. Nevertheless efforts were being made to improve them in order to meet the fall in prices by getting bigger yields. A great deal of under draining was being done; the landlords found the materials, tiles 9" long by 4" wide, and the tenant carted them and did the work. This kept the men employed and the poor rates down. In spite of this effort some of these lands were going out, and the grass produce got from them generally was declining. The three years 1828, 1829 and 1830 had been very wet and bad, and the land was suffering from want of proper manure. Even the heavy harvest of

1832 had not put the majority of Cheshire farmers in a position "to recover their land", and the 1833 crops looked disappointing.

Besides cattle, cheese was also then coming from Ireland as well as from Holland. Lee attributed the large drop in prices partly to that, and partly to bad trade in Manchester, which had reduced the ability to buy cheese there and in other large towns. Cheshire farmers had always found that when trade was good at Manchester cheese and other farm produce sold better. During the war cheese had sold very readily for £5 a cwt. in Manchester, but there was practically no sale at any price in 1833. Only £3 could be got by sending cheese to London. Formerly the London cheesemongers had employed factors in the county to bargain on their account, but many factors had failed and gone bankrupt so that the farmers were obliged to sell direct. Some farmers had been forced to take what they could get because they had to realise cash as soon as possible. The main month for cheese-making was June, and the large dairies did not sell till the following spring. Some cheese came on the market at Christmas, some was sold in February, but some men were able to hold their stocks till the following August or later.

Yet another of Mercer's surviving account books shows that by the 1830's Thomas Leech, who occupied Brine Pits Farm, Nantwich, a heavy wet farm of about 200 acres, from 1828 to 1854, was an enthusiastic drainer and user of bones. He seems to have put on about a hundred tons in the decade, and more in the 1840's, and he drained with tiles supplied or paid for by the landlord. He had 30-40 acres of tillage, a small herd of sows, and from twenty-six to thirty cows, the milk of which he made into cheese. His improvements were so far successful that his annual output rose from 88½ cwt. in 1829-1833, to 133 cwt. in 1850, and Dr. Mercer sees no reason to doubt that the productivity of the farm was raised 50% by the lavish use of bones in the early years of the tenancy.

William Palin of Stapleford Hall, Chester, who had been a practical dairy farmer for thirty years in 1845, thought that there had been great improvements by the introduction of turnips as a crop, and bone-dust as a manure during that time. The farming of the county could be divided into sand or clay-land dairies, and clay-land arable at that date.<sup>(25)</sup> There were but few sand-land arable farms then. Both classes of dairy farm included long leys in their rotations, the light land being worked on a course of oats sown at six bushels on broken ley; pigs or geese ran on the stubbles which were then ploughed and harrowed twice, and ploughed again for wheat, followed by swedes or potatoes in drills dressed with farmyard manure or bones; then barley with seeds for four or five years. There were variations, but that was typical. The heavier dairy land was cropped wheat, oats with seeds left down seven or eight years, but there were many variations here too. On the heavy

<sup>(25)</sup> "The farming of Cheshire", *Jour. R.A.S.E.* (1845).

arable farms beans were drilled after a two-year ley; wheat; fallow or turnips or part potatoes; wheat with seeds. Potatoes were more extensively grown between Runcorn and Altrincham for Manchester, whence stable manure was returned on the land. Some early cabbages were grown here after potatoes, but the crop was usually followed by wheat with clover mown and then grazed for four or five years. The long ley was an intrinsic part of the farming system of the county.

Some drainage had been done, but more was necessary. Marl and lime were now supplemented by some of the new manures, crushed bones, guano and nitrate of soda, presumably by the best farmers who had also adopted the new factory implements, such as Finlayson's harrow and the Uley cultivator. Ten years before the iron plough had been unknown, and some wooden ploughs were still in use in the more remote parts of the south and west of the county.

The dairymen were no more choice in the breed of cattle used than they had been in the past, and there were many crossbreeds. Yorkshire or Holderness Shorthorn, Lancashire and Staffordshire Longhorns, Devons, Ayrshire, Welsh, Irish and improved Shorthorns. Few sheep were bred, but about 65,000 were fed, and these again were a mixed lot. Nevertheless the estimated number of milch cows in the county was 100,666 in 1847 and their yield averaged 200-400 lb. of cheese, and 15-20 lb. butter. Lavergne,<sup>(26)</sup> who made this estimate, thought half the county was grassland on which the most successful manure was bone dust from Manchester. The farms averaged about 70 acres. The Marquis of Westminster had established a factory for drain tiles and gave them to farmers who would use them. This estimate of productivity and of the system of farming was generally accepted at the time.<sup>(27)</sup> There were, of course, superior farms. Caird noticed particularly a selected herd of Teeswater Shorthorns, housefed in summer on cut clover, rye grass and vetches; in winter on brewer's grains, turnips, mangolds with linseed cake, *etc.* if green food was short. Here wheat yielded 15-30 bushels an acre; oats 30-36 bushels, and sometimes two crops of potatoes were got in a year. A great deal of stable and cow-house manure was obtained from the towns by barge.

Part of the Forest of Delamere which lies between Chester and Northwich had been reclaimed at the end of the eighteenth century to the extent of 4,023 acres besides Old and New Pale Farms of 755 acres under a lease from the Crown. By an Act of Parliament of 1856 the Commissioners of Crown Lands were empowered to clear land and let it on farming leases. Honslough, an area of 248 acres was first taken in hand. It was cleared of timber, trench ploughed and marled; the marl digging was let to a contractor who could not

<sup>(26)</sup> *Rural Economy of England* (1855).

<sup>(27)</sup> W. L. Rham, *Dictionary of the Farm* (1850): James Caird, *English farming in 1850-51* (1851): J. C. Morton, *Cyclopaedia of Agriculture* (1856), "Dairy Management."

make it pay, so it had to be completed by direct labour and cost £1,797 or £7 4s. 11d. per acre. Farm buildings were subsequently erected, and the farm let at 30/- an acre, plus an interest charge on the cost of the buildings over £500. Before the work was done the land was only worth 5/- an acre. Other areas dealt with successfully in the same way were Longridge and Plover's Moss, an area of about 800 acres, completed in 1863; Organdale and Primrose Hill. Allotments, about 530 acres, were reclaimed in 1864. On Delamere Lodge Farm Mr. Leathers had 100 acres potatoes and 60 acres roots, both heavily dressed with artificials in 1862, and a clover crop as well as barley and oats. He overwintered 1790 sheep and sold them fat in the spring, and got high yields of cereals. Evidently this work was well worth while.<sup>(28)</sup>

The outbreak of cattle plague naturally caused some disturbance in the dairy industry. Thomas Rigby, tenant of Darnhall Farm, Over, estimated the losses during the outbreaks of rinderpest in 1865/6 at 35,000.<sup>(29)</sup> After this the compulsory slaughter policy further depleted stocks. Mr. Gould of Crouchley Farm, near Lymm, increased his tillage from 60 acres to 80 acres out of 240 acres after the outbreak; he reduced the number of his dairy cows and increased his sheep, but otherwise his farming continued to follow much the same routine as before, as was fairly general in the county.<sup>(30)</sup> Pigs were, of course, kept on all the dairy farms to consume the waste products.

Thomas Furber, who took over Brine Pits Farm from his uncle, Thomas Leech, in 1854, ran it exactly on the same lines. He suffered like others from the cattle plague of 1866, losing thirty-one cows nine in-calf heifers, two barren heifers and one year-old calf for which he was allowed £5 each by his landlord spread over three rent days, £2, £2, and £1. He only produced 19 cwt. of cheese in 1866, whereas he had been improving on his uncle's output from 1854 though he only made 111 cwt. in that year; but he made 160 cwt. in 1861 and 165 cwt. in 1865. Naturally, too, the returns from sale of calves dropped to nothing in 1866. He rebuilt the herd slowly, and he must have done it well because he made 129 cwt. of cheese in 1871 and 138 cwt. in 1872. Once again the bad years of the late 'seventies brought a difficult task upon him, but he was better able than many to weather this storm because he could now substitute family for hired labour, though his wife's illness made a hired cheese-maker necessary. He still raised more cattle than he sold off, and he grew less corn, most of the distant arable fields of the farm having been laid down. By, this time too, he was buying much larger quantities of maize-meal and bran, and some linseed cake. It is doubtful if other Cheshire farmers suffered no greater hardships than Furber.

<sup>(28)</sup> Richard B. Grantham, "Reclaiming . . . late Forest of Delamere", *Jour. R.A.S.E.* (1864).

<sup>(29)</sup> Mercer, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>(30)</sup> H. M. Jenkin, "Farming of Cheshire", *Jour. R.A.S.E.* (1870).

Furber had made no marked change in the management of his farm by the 1880s<sup>(31)</sup> and none was general in the county. The arable farms which produced potatoes for the towns continued to be cropped intensively with the help of town stable and dairy manure. Examples of these in 1877 were Kay of Warburton Park, who kept a flying flock and herd and fattened mutton and beef on arable crops, and Joseph Kinsey of Royal Oak Farm near Altrincham. Outstanding dairy farms were those of John Lea, of Stapleford Hall near Tarvin; Robinson, of Lea Green Hall, Middlewich; Charles Hollingshead, of Weaverbrook Farm, Minshull Vernon; Percival, of Hall Lane Farm, Daresbury near Runcorn; Joseph Trickett, of Moor Farm, near Sandway; George Millington, of Horseshoe Farm, Henbury near Macclesfield; Beecroft of Upton Green and John Gregory, of Waverton. Wright of Minshull Vernon had gone over to meat production.<sup>(32)</sup>

The main change during the first forty years of Queen Victoria's reign was selling liquid milk instead of making cheese and butter, although the south and east of the county remained faithful to its original industry. It was optimistically estimated that some farmers, such as Jackson of Noctorum, James Russell of Brimstage Hall and Thomas Wright of Spittal had doubled output since 1852 by the use of the new manures (bones like Leech and Furber), but the county stock of cattle decreased by 5,000 in the decade 1872-1881.<sup>(33)</sup> There had also been a deal of laying down to grass, perhaps only to be expected in a county so traditionally devoted to grazing. On Lord Egerton's estate, Tatton Park, Knutsford, the agent, G. Carter, had laid down a large area of the home farm; Joseph Aston of Brassey Green, Tarporley, had made grass of his whole farm of 173 acres "long before the rise in labour"; Thomas Pinchett, Rushton, Tarporley, had only 20 acres arable out of 145 acres held on a yearly tenancy; Charles Willis of Ridley Hall, Tarporley, had grassed and broken up following the dictates of circumstances.<sup>(34)</sup>

For the three decades from 1885 to the outbreak of World War I the evidence about Cheshire farming is confined to reports on the top-notch farms that won prizes in the Royal Agricultural Society's competitions and an essay on typical farms written in 1893.

In the 1885 competition John Lea of Stapleford Hall near Tarvin, who had taken a prize in the 1877 competition, took another first. He had been rearranging the fields by altering the fences, filling up marl pits which wasted a measurable area, levelling land, making roads, draining and ditching. He had two Dutch barns and he used bones, guano and other manure. He grew wheat, oats,

<sup>(31)</sup> Mercer, *op. cit.*, p. 83-87.

<sup>(32)</sup> Samuel D. Sherriff, "Report of Liverpool Prize Farms", *Jour. R.A.S.E.* (1877): cf. J. A. Clarke, "Practical Agriculture", *ibid.* (1878).

<sup>(33)</sup> Richmond Commission, *Report of Andrew Coleman* (1881).

<sup>(34)</sup> Evans and Bowstead, "Report of laying down", *Jour. R.A.S.E.* (1875).

swedes, potatoes and clover on his 104 acres of arable, and he had a large herd of cattle. There were ninety-one Shorthorn cows including twenty two-year old heifers. The previous year there had been eighty-five cows in milk producing 18 tons of cheese and 1,942 lbs. of butter, in addition to 4,905 gallons of milk sold. A large quantity of purchased feed was used including linseed and cotton cake, bran, India meal and brewer's grains. In that year Lea sold nineteen fat cattle. Fruit, vegetables and young trees were sold from two acres of garden, and £52 was realised on sales of poultry. Lea bred horses in a small way. He had four horses and two mares and a colt from one of them, and he had a very complete equipment of implements. Thomas Parton of Chorlton Farm, Weston, near Crewe, who occupied 82 acres of arable and 84 acres of permanent pasture, won the second prize in this class, and his farming was much the same as Lea's. He had the same excellent assortment of implements and he grew the same crops buying superphosphates, bones, guano, and kainit for manure, and linseed and cotton cake, maize and thirds for feed. He kept a substantial herd, not quite so large as Lee's, but did some breeding, as he did, of horses, and he kept a stallion for letting. He had nine breeding sows, and bought in about thirty sheep for overwintering.

Robinson of Lee Green Hall, Church Minshull, and Cyrus Lea of Duddon Hall, Tarvin, were commended in this class. They had dairy farms of over 100 acres, and their farming was on almost exactly similar lines to that of the prize winners.

In the group 30 acres to 100 acres, two Cheshire farmers were highly commended. They were Thomas Lowe of Higher Hall, Malpas, and Samuel Walley of Rowley Farm, Elkington, Tarporley. With only minor differences in the stock distribution, these farms were run on precisely the same lines as the larger holdings. John Gregory of Waverton, near Chester, farmed much in the same way. Some of these farms had been in the same family for generations.<sup>(35)</sup>

The competition of 1885 included farms in Cheshire, Lancashire and North Wales. Besides the dairy and stock farms there was a separate competition for arable farms, though this distinction was difficult to draw in Cheshire. Two Cheshire farms won prizes. Charles Sherwin of Ashby Hall, Altrincham, secured the second prize for arable farms over 100 acres. His holding consisted of 215 acres arable and only 14½ acres pasture. A special prize in this class was also awarded to James Collwood of Chelford, Crewe, whose holding consisted of 162 acres arable and 42 acres pasture. Both were dairy and breeding farms carrying about thirty milch kine and followers, and both owned pedigree Shorthorn bulls. Both made heavy purchases of town manure and used bones, and Collwood bought nitrate of soda. Sherwin used lime. The rotations were aimed largely at the production of home grown feed and a

<sup>(35)</sup> J. Chalmers Morton, "Report on the dairy and stock farm competition, 1885", *Jour. R.A.S.E.* (1886).

good many potatoes were grown. Otherwise the work was done on the usual pattern of Cheshire farming.<sup>(36)</sup>

The typical farms of 1893 were not very different. They ranged in size from the 18 acres occupied by Burrows at Whitegates, Marton, Northwich, to 367 acres occupied by David Byrd and Son, at Spurston Hall, Tarporley. Naturally, perhaps, two prize winners of 1885 were included. They were John Lea of Stapleford Hall, Tarporley, who had also won a prize in a previous competition, and Thomas Parton of Weston Hall near Crewe, who had put one of his sons in at Chorlton. Both these had large milking herds and followers and a fair sized flock of sheep. The former had a few sows and seventy head of poultry. R. P. Walley of Cotton Abbots, near Chester, had grassed down the 80 acres tillage that was on his farm when he entered it twenty years before making his whole farm of 282 acres a pasture. He bred shires. John Smith of Sudlow, Knutsford, occupied 210 acres of which 200 acres were arable largely directed to producing home-grown feeding stuffs. There was a wide variation in farming systems, but the focal point of each undertaking seems to have been the dairy herd. Of course several other farms were mentioned in this report. Those mentioned here are quite a random sample.<sup>(37)</sup>

Once again in 1910 there was a farm prize competition. To the judges of this competition the Cheshire dairy stock seemed rather disappointing and capable of great improvement. The fences and gates generally were good, and the land was highly manured. The implements and the buildings generally were good. There were Dutch barns. All this showed spirited farming. The first and second prizes for stock or dairy farms of 150 acres, or over, were won by Thomas E. Goodman, of Henshull Hall, Nantwich, and S. S. Rain-gill of The Grange, Altrincham. Apart from the introduction of basic slag, sulphate of ammonia, nitrate of soda, and kainit and possibly a more liberal use of purchased concentrates, the system of farming followed the well-established and successful lines. So did the last of Mercer's long line of account keepers, Joseph Furber,<sup>(38)</sup> whose developments followed the same principles of larger purchases of the newly available artificials and concentrates.

Substantially Cheshire farming aimed at the same targets during the four centuries. The county was always famous for dairy products, and it continued to produce what it was suited for and found profitable. The cultivated area was obviously extended during that time by the reclamation of forest, moor and moss. New crops, like potatoes, came into prominence with the rise of the manufacturing towns, for which other market-garden crops were also developed.

<sup>(36)</sup> James Edwards, "Report on the farm prize competition of 1885", *Jour. R.A.S.E.* (1885).

<sup>(37)</sup> J. Bowen-Jones, "Typical farms in Cheshire and North Wales", *Jour. R.A.S.E.* (1893).

<sup>(38)</sup> Wm. H. Hogg, "Farm Prize Competition 1910", *Jour. R.A.S.E.* (1910); Mercer, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-89.

It is extremely probable that the type of cattle used was substantially changed from an approximate Longhorn in the early days to a mixed type of Shorthorn in the early years of the twentieth century. Marling, liming and sanding had been so consistently done for centuries that the soil must have been practically remade, and perhaps that was necessary because of the continual export of dairy products and livestock. By the end of the eighteenth century marl was no longer extensively used, and the old pits were being filled up to increase available acreage and level out the fields. Every possible advantage was taken of the benefits conferred upon farmers by the progress of science in the nineteenth century, except that fewer pedigree stock were kept than might have been expected. The imported feeding stuffs had been brought into fairly general use by then, and the quantities bought were increasing at the dawn of the twentieth century, as were those of the new chemical fertilisers.

