

Hard work but a fair reward: The farming life of John Byram, 1831-1871¹

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Few mid nineteenth-century farmers kept any form of accounts, and fewer still have survived – in Cheshire probably only two, the Owens of Barnston and the subject of this article, John Byram of Overpool. Both farmed in Wirral though on a different scale, Byram having an above-average farm of about 220 acres, mainly given over to cheese production, whilst the Owens held only 57 acres, mainly used for stock purchase and fattening for re-sale. Both left some record of their activity. Byram's will be described more fully below, but the Owens' can be disposed of briefly here. Initially, they kept a totalled record of sales and expenditure, though in later years the entries become more patchy and untotaled.² To make matters worse, they mixed expenditure so that it is hard to distinguish private from business items. The result of these is that the record is even less suitable for analysis than Byram's, which itself creates considerable difficulties, as will be seen below. Although comparisons can be made between the two on specific occasions, we cannot compare them year by year over a substantial period.

Byram farmed at Overpool in Wirral for 40 years, at Pool Farm, Little Sutton from 1831 to 1871, when he retired, married and lived contentedly, as far as we know, until he died in 1886. His father died young and his mother ran the farm until he was old enough to take over in 1831; that puts his birth to about 1810, though successive census returns show that he was as uncertain as to his age as to the spelling of his name. Succession was a common

¹ I am grateful to Tony Bostock, Jonathan Pepler and his staff at the Chester and Cheshire Archives for assistance in preparing this article, and to the anonymous referees for identifying earlier defects.

² Their record is held in the Chester and Cheshire Archives, D3445/2.

arrangement, encouraged by Cheshire landowners as it gave stability to their estates. He lived a bachelor until he retired, with a substantial household, as we shall see. His mother did not live with him, but most likely moved to Great Budworth, where he had been born and where ultimately she was buried, leaving him to run the farm on his own. She did not die until 1877, aged 90, several years after he had retired. Having no wife and family, he had to employ labour in the house and for cheese making, but it is typical of the incomplete nature of his record that it contains no reflection of these, the only references to labour being payments for what must have been casual work in the fields. We may infer that he was a reasonable employer from the fact that Elizabeth Siddorn, probably a widow, middle aged, was with him in 1841 and was still there in 1851, with Sarah, aged 28, presumably her daughter. She had gone by 1861 but she would by then have been over 60. Others, mostly younger, came and went.³

Byram's farm was large by Cheshire standards, about 220 acres, in a county where the majority of farms had fewer than 50.⁴ Although Dod suggested that it might have been smaller in the early years, the accounts do not support this, and it had certainly reached its permanent size by 1843 when his rent was the normal £257. He rented most of it from the marquess of Westminster, paying £228, but seems to have rented a little from elsewhere as his total rent was £257.⁵ It was poor, rather marshy land and his crop yields were poor, and this affected his profit and presumably his rent. These are all matters to which we will return, but it is time to look at the record itself.

In contrast to Dod's approach, the purpose of this article is to review the whole period of Byram's farming life and amplify aspects which Dod's study neglected. This article should thus be read in conjunction with his and does not attempt to repeat

³ The background information in this paragraph and elsewhere is taken from an earlier article on Byram by J. Phillip Dod, 'A Cheshire cheesemaker, 1831-71', *Cheshire history*, 4 (1979), pp. 91-103, and from Cheshire directories and successive census returns.

⁴ Census entries vary between 217, 220 and 240 acres, but as rent remained the same, these variations suggest carelessness rather than real differences.

⁵ The Grosvenor ledgers show his regular and prompt payments of rent, as in EV208 for 1865. He never seems to have paid late, let alone defaulted.

aspects of his work which cannot be improved. While building upon Dod's work, this assessment differs from his, for the aim has been to look at the economics of farming as an accountancy exercise over his entire career and to try to see it as part of rural Cheshire for a large part of the nineteenth century. This is a less anecdotal approach.

On the outside of the notebook is written 'John Byram's, Madeley Manor, Staffordshire, 1831', but the first entries date from 1839, about eight years after he started farming.⁶ It measures 18.5 cms by 12 cms by 3 cms deep and the farm records cover pages 39 to 112 of its 231 total, the remainder being filled with the memorabilia familiar in Victorian collections – cuttings from newspapers, family records, poems and such like, including carefully transcribed details of his claim to recover tax deducted from his Mersey Docks bonds. His wife, Sarah, whom he married in 1873 when she was 33, made entries after he died in 1886, and after her death in 1907 more entries were made, probably by their son, born in 1879 when Byram was 69. The cover inscription is puzzling for there is no obvious connection with Madeley; it may be that he was there on business, bought it and recorded the fact on the cover. But if he felt that he needed it, why did he not use it?

There is no consistent set of 'accounts' as we would understand them. Byram was primarily concerned to maintain a record of cheese sales and he did so without a break from 1839. At first he recorded sales by the year, seemingly on a calendar basis though that is not stated, but from about 1851 he adopted a 'vintage' basis, ruling off and totalling when the year's production was finally sold, which could be well into the next year. Fortunately, he recorded the month of each sale, usually in order, so that with some risk of error an annual calendar total can be calculated. On occasion, he recorded sales of oats, wheat and potatoes, with hints at other crops, though he did not do so consistently. It cannot be claimed that the accounts set out as an appendix (see pages 123-24) are entirely accurate and total profit must be understated. In part, this is because there are entries which suggest that crops were grown, without a corresponding sale entry, as in 1864, when he entered the cost per acre of reaping

⁶ The notebook is held in Chester and Cheshire Archives, DDX183.

wheat and mowing grass, clover and oats. Although the convention was to farm about one third of the land as arable, it is doubtful whether he ever did so, and the largest arable acreage that he recorded was 48 acres under oats in 1847. He may, of course, have had other land under other crops which he did not record. There must have been regular crop sales, even though he recorded them for only 13 years and it must be admitted that the range of missing years tends to undermine some of Dod's conclusions on crop yields, especially when there is only one entry after 1853. The implication is that he was interested in his cheese not total farm production. There must be understatement also because it is hard otherwise to account for the amount of money he accumulated, an intriguing subject to which we will return.

This irregularity and the 'vintage' basis do not mean that Byram had no sense of profit and loss. For two years, 1843 and 1844, he did draw up simple accounts, being far in advance of his peers and most Cheshire landowners in doing so. Like the notebook as a whole, it is also testament to his standard of literacy. Unfortunately, it is hard to see how he arrived at some of the 1843 totals and there seems to be a slight arithmetical error between the original entries and the totals which he adopted and which are given below. It is not clear either why he included two totals for cheese, save that he may have been tacitly distinguishing between batches. As they stand, his figures are:

Cheese	174-17-0
Wheat	<u>84-09-7</u>
	259-06-7
Cheese	148-08-0
	<u>407-14-7</u>
Rent	257-02-0
'Ballance'	150-12-7

My reworking of his original entries makes the total income to be £417-14-7 but given the intricacies of his recording, it is impossible to be certain which of us is right. On page 100 he included £15-8-0 for 'pigs and butter', but did not carry this forward into the summary on page 110.

1844 is simpler:

Wheat	49-02-6
Potatoes	16-14-2
Cheese	<u>313-04-0</u>
	379-00-8
Rent	<u>257-02-0</u>
'Ballance'	121-18-8

In neither of these did he take any account of labour or other expenses, nor did he give the cost of restocking cattle after epidemic, so his 'ballance' was gross profit. Given the scale of his likely expenses, other than labour, this may not have affected net profit very much, for he seems to have saved seed and grown fodder. Labour costs do remain an issue. Irritatingly, although he set out how much he paid per acre for fieldwork, he never set out the actual acreages or the cash cost. In reconstructing the accounts, what information there is has been included and any unquantified entries have been indicated thus 'xxxx' in the tabulated accounts appended to this article, but we cannot get closer than gross profit and even that with some margin of error. To compound the problems, we have a number of entries which cannot be assigned to any specific year.

One question to be addressed is whether the rent charged by the marquess of Westminster was an unfair proportion of the yield from the land. This was a common accusation, specifically made by Sir James Caird in the mid nineteenth century and one that remains to be explored.⁷ Conventional wisdom at the time was that the tenant's profit either equalled the rent or equalled half of it. Such a wide variation makes economic models of little value, despite much discussion in, for example, the *Agrarian history of England*.⁸ It is better to work with what few facts we have. Column 9 of the reconstructed accounts sets out the percentage of total income represented by rent. Unsurprisingly, it shows remarkable variations, though the high extremes can be ignored as they

⁷ J. Caird, *English Agriculture 1850-51* (London, 1851), letter xxxi.

⁸ G. E. Mingay in H. Finberg and J. Thirsk, eds, *Agrarian history of England* (8 vols, Cambridge, 1967-2000), 7, chapter 14, especially p. 931.

represent years of cattle epidemic when there was almost certainly support from the landlord, although Byram only recorded it once. Leaving those extremes aside, there were obviously good years and bad, and the price of cheese was as important as the production; generally the price improved over the years, giving him an advantage compared with the fixed rent. Even so, he was at the mercy not only of disease but of the weather, and 1868 was recorded as a very dry year, with an inevitable effect upon the yield. In spite of the consideration that has been given to the issue, one may question whether discussion of it has much merit, for it assumes that there is somewhere an officially approved 'proper' share to which both parties should aspire and whether that proportion is fixed or can vary according to economic conditions, the quality of the land and even the course of a long lived tenancy. It is too philosophical a topic for a brief article like this, and a better question, which can be more satisfactorily answered, is whether Byram was able to prosper.⁹

We must not lose sight of the weaknesses in the reconstructed accounts set out in the appendix. There are omissions of both income and expenditure, but what follows is based upon the assumption that the unknown receipts balanced and probably exceeded the unknown outgoings, so that the figures in column eight of the appendix represent minimum net profit, that is the balance struck after known and unknown receipts, and known and unknown expenditure, but before personal expenses are considered.¹⁰ We may draw a little reassurance from Byram's disregard of expenses other than rent in striking his own 'ballance', which suggests that he did not regard them as significant. This approach gives us two measures of profitability. The first is the net profit compared with rent. The second is clear surplus money available for investment, compared with rent. The latter was a discretionary amount, as it was an alternative to personal expenditure. We have to make another assumption, which is that

⁹ For a fuller consideration see S. Matthews, 'Underwriting disaster', *Agricultural history review* (forthcoming).

¹⁰ The calculations are based upon the simple but often forgotten equation that what you have at the start of a period plus what you receive during it must equal what you have spent during the period and what you have left at the end of it.

he inherited no substantial amount of cash from his parents and in cash terms started from scratch. The assumption is made more reasonable by his mother's retaining her own bank account, in which she presumably held her own profits, though she added to his capital in 1852 when he recorded receiving £50 from her savings bank account. He must have had accumulated some money before 1840 for in that year he noted that his brother repaid him the whole of a debt of £339. For this exercise, these two sums were probably his opening capital. The first logical break point comes in 1858, when he bought his first bond, and the account shows that in the 19 years from 1840 to 1858 his net profit came to £2,625.¹¹ The point is that in September 1859 Byram recorded the purchase of £1,000 Mersey Docks bonds.¹² The entry suggests that this was a first purchase. The mathematics therefore are that over those 19 years he had accumulated surplus capital of £1,000 - (£339+£50) = £611 after all cost and living expenses, out of profit of £2,625. This gives us two percentages. His net profit averaged $\frac{£2,625}{19} = £138$ per year, which represented 53 per cent of his rent. His surplus for investment averaged £32 per year, which was 12 per cent of rent. These figures are probably an understatement, as in the following year he bought £500 more bonds. Since he recorded no income of that amount, the probability is that they were bought, at least in part, from capital held earlier.

If we look at the remaining years, from 1859 to 1871, another surplus arises. In those years, his profits came to £2,017 if post-cessation receipts are included, which average at £168 per year and represent just over 65 per cent of rent. His bond holdings rose by £1,500, to which we can add his £421 post-cessation

¹¹ I have adopted year end figures on the basis that intra-year calculations (that is receipts from 1 January 1859 to September 1859) introduce unnecessary complexity into what are inevitably rough and ready calculations.

¹² This was a huge issue, made by the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board to finance the Liverpool docks. By 1874 the bonds accounted for over 71 per cent of the £20 million raised by 41 authorities to finance harbour and river works. J. F. Wilson, 'The finance of municipal capital expenditure in England and Wales 1870-1914', *Financial history review*, 4. 1 (1997), p. 34; H. Page, *Local authority borrowing, past, present and future* (London, 1985).

receipts, which was then spare money. This increase averaged £160 per year, which represents 62 per cent of rent. For the final years, we are even more working to minimum profits, for in only one year did he record subsidiary sales, of a substantial £166, and he survived the two extremely lean plague years of 1865 and 1866, when he must have shared in the support offered to tenant farmers by the marquess.¹³ Unfortunately, we cannot quantify the amount. These figures suggest not only that market formulae are only generalisations that do not necessarily apply to any particular individual, but that in the course of a long tenancy price inflation compared with a fixed rent created an advantage for the tenant.

Byram sold cheese where he could, though he seems to have concentrated upon Liverpool, perhaps through convenience and perhaps on the basis that if you have a good outlet, you stick with it. Ease of transport would underlie the choice, but he did on occasion sell cheese at Chester fair, Newcastle-under-Lyne and Stockport. Price varied with the fluctuations of the market and the quality of the cheese, but there was a general upward trend, from 60 shillings or below at the start to over 80 shillings towards the end, with a peak of 91 shillings in 1866. This inevitably had an effect upon profit. Physical production varied with the seasons and with the size of his herd. His cheese seems to have been good, for Dod noted that he took second prize for coloured cheese and 'highly commended' for uncoloured at the Cheshire agricultural show in 1858.¹⁴

We cannot tell what Byram's labour costs amounted to. He paid for casual work in the fields, hoeing and topping turnips and other crops, but his main expenditure must have been spent on permanent staff, some of whom lived in, some out. The census returns show the following:

Year	Total	Living in		Living out	
		F	M	F	M
1841	3	3 (1 G)			
1851	6	2	3 (1 B)		1

¹³ The outbreak was rinderpest, not foot and mouth as stated by Dod. For the marquess's contribution, see Matthews, 'Underwriting disaster'.

¹⁴ Dod, 'Cheshire cheesemaker', pp. 99-100.

1861	5	2	3 (1 B)
1871	?1	1	

Source: census returns.

Abbreviations: F = female; M = male; G = girl, 15 or under; B = boy, 15 or under.

Generally, the nineteenth century saw a steady decline in 'live in' employment, less so in the north of England, and local wage rates are hard to establish. Chambers and Mingay cite male live-in wages in Westmoreland of £10-£12 for men and £7-£8 for women.¹⁵ These figures should not be taken as accurate for Cheshire, but they do indicate the scale of cost. Whatever they were, their wages would eat to a small degree into the surplus profit otherwise available for saving and his own living expenses. Being unmarried, Byram needed a larger female establishment not only for cheese making – traditionally the preserve of the farmer's wife – but also for normal domestic care.

The market generalisation, that the tenant's profit was equal to either the rent or to half the rent, begs a number of questions, most importantly, what is included in the tenant's profit. Living expenses and savings must be, but are capital improvements, the cost of seed and the replacement of livestock to be treated as paid for out of profit, or deducted, albeit maybe as an amortisation, after 'profit' is struck? The balance is complicated by the custom that landlords tended to pay for capital improvements like drainage, raising the rent by a specified amount to compensate, as we see on the Crewe estates.¹⁶ There was also no clear distinction between capital and revenue; such accounting as there was, was on a cash basis, although in the final reckoning when a tenant left, any improvements he had made had to be taken into consideration. Byram's career highlights the difficulties. For part of the period his net profit did equal roughly half the rent;

¹⁵ J.D. Chambers and G.E. Mingay, *The agricultural revolution 1750-1880* (London, 1966), p. 193; for female employment generally, see Nicola Verdon, *Rural women workers in nineteenth-century England* (Woodbridge, 2002).

¹⁶ Chester and Cheshire Archives, DCR 59/5/97-108, for the 1860s and early 1870s.

for the remainder it was roughly equal to the whole of it. Both generalisations seem to be correct at different times but neither is for the whole.

The true profit lay somewhere between the profit before expenses shown by the reconstructed accounts and the savings. Even before considering more difficult questions of accountancy principle, we simply do not know how he spent his money. His 'in' servants would be paid a wage but how does one apportion the cost of food and accommodation provided? How much seed was saved and how much bought? His entries hint at answers but no more than that. In the end, both the question and the answer dissolve into a series of abstractions, as indeed they still do, for modern taxation systems have never found a satisfactory formula for taxing farmers.

We have to ask a different question. Could hard work and a viable farm size provide a comfortable surplus for retirement? The answer to that is clearly yes. Byram's life was not solely grinding hard work – he exhibited his cheese at the Cheshire agricultural show, so must have had time available and a modest social standing. A smaller farm may not have given tenants the same opportunity unless, like the Owens, they specialised, in their case in stock fattening for resale. Their 57 acres gave them enough surplus to buy their farm when the estate was sold, for £580.¹⁷ Their record does not show how that sum was held before, whether in cash or in a savings account. A small mixed dairy and arable farm may, by contrast, have been an unrewarding slog; the truth is that we simply do not know. Byram broke through the size barrier into relative prosperity; with £2,500 in bonds, spare money from his final sales and a certain reputation as a cheesemaker, he must have been an attractive prospect for his 33-year-old bride.

¹⁷ Chester and Cheshire Archives, D3445.

Appendix: Byram's cash account, 1839-71

Year	Cheese income	Wheat income	Oats income	Other income	Total income	Rent	Gross profit	Rent as a % of total income	Other costs entered
1839	120				120				
1840	300				300	257	43	86	
1841	304				304	257	47	85	39+4
1842	310				310	257	53	83	xxxx
1843	333	84		11 pota- toes + 15 pigs etc	443	257	186	58	
1844	313	49			362	257	105	71	
1845	383	100	21		504	257	247	51	1
1846	356	132			488	257	231	53	
1847	184	103		100 cattle	387	257	130	66	xxxx
1848	369	49			418	257	161	61	
1849	266	52		118 allow- ance	436	257	179	59	
1850	202	80			282	257	25	91	
1851	300	24			324	257	67	79	26
1852	346	9			355	257	98	72	8 xxxx
1853	352	8			360	257	103	71	22
1854	486				486	257	229	53	
1855	416				416	257	159	62	
1856	384				384	257	127	67	
1857	488				488	257	231	53	
1858	461				461	257	204	56	
1859	450				450	257	193	57	
1860	460				460	257	203	56	
1861	346				346	257	89	74	
1862	387				387	257	130	66	xxxx
1863	464				464	257	207	55	
1864	386				386	257	129	67	xxxx
1865	265				265	257	8	97	
1866	261			xxxx	261	257	4	98	
1867	405				405	257	148	63	

1868	361		361	257	104	71	xxxx
1869	527	166	693	257	436	37	
1870	202		202	257	-55	0	But did he hold stock back for 1871?
1871	544		544	(123)	421	23	

Totals: gross profit 1839-58 = £2,625; gross profit 1859-70 = £1,596.

Source: Chester and Cheshire Archives, DDX183.

Abbreviation: xxxx = unquantified/uncosted entry.