

## **Arthur Young's impression of Hertfordshire: farming in the 1800s**

Of all the reports written by Arthur Young on the agriculture of England it would be surprising indeed if Hertfordshire were not among them. Brought up on a small farm at Bradfield in Suffolk and educated at Lavenham, he eventually married and took a farm of his own at Samford Hall in Essex. He moved again at the age of 27 to North Mymms in the hope of greater success; in trying to combine farming with an already considerable writing career however, he again failed. It seems to have left a bitter taste, for although he refers to the land at North Mymms as being among the worst in the country, a near neighbour, Mr Brown is reported as having the best farm buildings in Hertfordshire. This would hardly have been the case if the land had not proved to be worth the effort. The report, written against a background of high prices, rising demands and an ever increasing poor rate shows the county at least in step, if not somewhat in advance of agricultural methods of the day; with the needs of the capital having a strong influence on many aspects of life generally.

Farms in general were not very large and although leases were given, copyhold seems to have been the usual arrangement. Young regrets this, considers leases to be necessary to the well running of a farm, and again mentions North Mymms in this context. However, security of tenure was more a question of good relations between landlord and tenant (Mingay.1994: 146). Bad tenants might well leave a property in poor condition requiring the landlord to spend considerable money on repairs before he could let again, and from the tenant's point of view there would be no case of being tied down to a long lease at a fixed rate if prices started to fall. A well run and maintained farm would benefit all parties concerned and would form the basis for mutual trust and respect which probably provided a better means for security of tenure than anything else. Land in an area of good transport links with easy access to a ready market for its produce, and where demand outstripped supply, would always mean rents were going to be high. This in turn put pressure on farmers to make the best use of all available resources and to keep an eye on any new developments.

The land itself varied considerably from the rich loams in much of the east and centre, to chalk in the north, and gravel around Hatfield to the south east. Generally speaking the better land was nearest to the capital.

Agricultural practise seems to have been at least as advanced as anywhere else in the kingdom. Crop rotation had been in use for some time, and common use was made of crops such as clover, which helped increase production by boosting nitrogen in the soil. Turnips were also grown as a fodder crop although some farmers had begun to introduce the more reliable swede. The other prime means of keeping the land fertile was by constant manuring which, in the case of obtaining night soil or bones from London, might involve a journey of thirty miles or more each way. This would have been a very time consuming and expensive business, which surely could only be justified by the high price of corn at the time. Other manures were also used such as ashes from Bedfordshire and rape dust from Cambridge. Some of the poorest land, especially the gravels in the Hatfield area required almost constant manuring to maintain fertility and so incurred the

highest cost. To some extent though this would be offset by relatively low transport costs, these areas being closer to London.

The overall impression seems to be of land being used to its utmost capacity in the face of ever increasing demand. Although much is made in the report of farmer's individual methods of cultivation, Young fails to find any major innovation that would lead to greater production, which is probably what he was looking for (Wilmot, 1996: 114). Young's remarks in the preface of the report to the effect that the county had failed to progress, though true, seem unfair. The probability is that further progress at his time may well have been difficult and what had actually happened was that other areas had caught up. If new methods were available at the time it is unlikely that one of the prominent landowners would not have at least tried the experiment. The Marchioness of Salisbury, for example, is recorded as having kept buffaloes, an indication of her readiness to try something new, and the large Hatfield House estate would have had plenty of room to try out any new methods of cultivation or fertilization. Young at the end of his report confirms this, stating that seventeen acres had already been set aside for such purposes. However mechanization was in its infancy and the introduction of other fertilizers was some way off (Mingay, 1994: 39). The only other way to increase production therefore was to bring more land into cultivation, this meant enclosure. Young's comments about lack of improvement may well have related to the situation regarding this in the north of the county.

Much of Hertfordshire had already been enclosed and opportunities were limited (Thirsk 1984: 56). But there were some especially in the north, and here farmers felt restricted by the continued use of the open field system. Mr Forster of Royston was one, and complained understandably of sheep eating his crop and of land being left to lie fallow rather than being part of a proper rotation. Although enclosure could be a long and costly business, most farmers welcomed it for the control it gave them over their own affairs: the opportunity to use proper rotation, to introduce new stock, as well as to make improvements in the direction of farm buildings (Mingay, 1997: 83). The farmers of north Hertfordshire were no exception in this. Indeed a scheme at Barkway, a few miles away from Royston, had just been completed where great improvements were expected. Much, but not all, of the enclosing was done at this time. That this could be well worth the effort is brought to our attention by Young in his relating of an instance at Market Street (Markyate). Here it seems that nothing less than a whole new farm had been created with new barns, stables and house; in addition there was a well, garden, and a limekiln. What was especially noteworthy though was the crop, with the two large barns being completely filled after just one year. Young was mightily impressed and says in the report 'such an improvement, effected in such a space of time, I never yet beheld' (1804:151). It was in the enclosure of this type of land it seems, rather than in the conversion of existing open field systems that the greatest rise in production could be expected. All of this of course required a great deal of capital, and it is likely that the Mr Pickford, who had leased the land, was a substantial farmer already. It may well have been the cost of enclosure that delayed the process in the north of the county where although farms could be large, the land being mostly chalk was less fertile, and the farmers were relatively poor.

In spite of the obvious advantages, and the desire to proceed, one senses a great deal of debate would have taken place before the decision to go ahead. Some idea of the actual costs involved can be got by looking at those for a county nearby: Buckinghamshire. Here figures indicate the cost could be as high as £1.75 per acre, rising to over £2. per acre if works carried out after the award, such as new hedges being made, are included, (Turner, 1997:103-104). On this basis, the cost of Mr Pickford's scheme at Markyate, would be between £900 and £1200. The smaller farmer or those working the poorest land would find these costs especially hard to bear, and those not able to borrow may well have given up all together. In addition prices everywhere were rising including the charges of surveyors and commissioners for whom enclosure could be a very lucrative business. Figures for Weston, in the north of the county, put commissioners charges alone at over £2 per day, an enormous sum when compared with agricultural wages of between ten and fourteen shillings per week. At Hertingfordbury, some of the cost was avoided when the commissioners work was undertaken by three local men, Mr Calvert, Mr Byde of Ware Park and the Rev. Mr Browne, an arrangement that Young would like to see universally adopted. It may well be that enclosure here affected mainly other gentleman farmers such as Mr Byde, as all three men are mentioned as being friends of those wishing to have the enclosure done. Also this particular enclosure seems to have been fairly straightforward, the enclosure map shows that over three quarters of the land involved was owned by one man, Earl Cowper, the largest landowner in Hertfordshire at that time, with all the smaller plots situated on the perimeter of the map. The arrangement to save costs was no doubt adopted to help out the smaller landowners. The commissioners task though, even if relatively straightforward here, would not have been an easy one. Especially when it came to the fair re-allocation of land, it must have been hard to satisfy everybody, and relationships may well have become strained. Nevertheless this arrangement must have had the considerable advantages of intimate local knowledge and, at least in Mr Byde's case, considerable practical farming experience. This time consuming work though, whatever Arthur Young's wishes, was always likely in most other cases to be done by professionals. Apart from the fact that most enclosures may well have been more involved, how many men would be able to spare enough time from their everyday labours, perhaps up to one hundred days in some cases, in order to do commissioners work? Much of the remaining enclosure undertaken in Hertfordshire involved common and waste land and this must have had some impact at least on a problem which seemed to be rapidly getting out of control: the plight of the poor and the ever increasing poor rate.

Rate financed relief for the poor had been in existence since 1597 (Mingay, 1994: 94). As well as providing aid for those temporarily out of work, help was also available for those unable to work because of sickness. Although the system varied as to the type of relief given it seems to have served its purpose. With initially low population levels and full employment those in need were few and the poor law arrangement able to cope. However in the eighteenth century there was something of a population explosion. This had two effects, the first being that there was less employment on the land and many moved to the towns to try to find work; although likely many just added to the number of the urban poor.

The second effect following on from this was that demand, even for basic food increased and prices rose steeply. So steeply in fact that even those in work were unable to survive without help from poor relief. Young's opening comments on the state of the poor suggest he was disappointed in what he found and expected that because of being near to London the situation in Hertfordshire should have been better than it actually was. A few examples taken from poor rates in various parts of the county show the grim reality. In the east of the county at Sawbridgeworth, rates had risen from three shillings to twelve shillings in the pound, at Hatfield the rise was from three to seven shillings and at Kings Langley in the west there was a similar increase. In some parts increases were even higher reaching some seventeen shillings in the pound. Clearly if Young was expecting to find any glimmer of hope with regard to helping the less fortunate in the countryside it was not to be found in Herts. Some extra relief was perhaps available, where workers were employed by the larger estates such as Ashridge, Gorehambury, and Hatfield. Here regular workers directly employed for many years may well have been helped in times of distress. However, for the majority such help was not available. One alternative was for the worker to grow some of his own food but most of the labourer's cottages seem to have lacked sufficient garden, if indeed they had garden at all. In a few cases farmers allowed odd corners of land for the planting of potatoes (Young, 1804: 225), but again this could have been of only limited relief. Some would also have access to common and wasteland on which they could keep livestock and gather fuel, although as stated above what little land of this type there was, was fast disappearing. What is also true is that this all involved extra physical toil in addition to the twelve hours or so already done, and that on a diet which was inadequate in the first place; a far from ideal solution, a viscous circle in fact. Therefore the poor rate continued to rise, as it did in most other southern counties at this time, and the condition of the rural working class continued to deteriorate (Mingay, 1994: 97).

The obvious solution was to increase wages, which had declined in real terms (Overton, 1996: 68). In fact Young comments on this with regard to piece - work ( Young, 1804: 218). Farmers, at least in most areas of the county could well afford to pay a little more but were reluctant to admit the fact. In the section of the report on profits nothing is said although they seem only too ready to comment on expenses. The likelihood is that farmers here were making a very good living at this time: Mr Pickford's experience at Market Street shows this, as does the mention of Mr Browns buildings at South Mymms. As to actual figures for profit, the only ones available are those for land at Hatfield House (Young, 1804: 234 ) Admittedly these refer to seventeen acres of experimental land, but nevertheless they give some idea of what could be achieved. These show expenses of £135.10s as compared to a profit of £462.10s, or put another way expenses of £7.9s per acre (slightly higher than the average for Hertfordshire), and a profit of £27 per acre.

Why under these circumstances were farmers not prepared to pay more? It could be argued that they were being prudent, knowing from experience that bad years were likely to follow good. But in bad years labour was likely to be laid off anyway. The large estates probably had to keep a certain number of staff on, but then they probably were rich enough to do so.

Notwithstanding the fact that some landowners did try to help the poor in some way, one is left with the impression that the reason they were reluctant to raise wages was quite simply greed and self-interest.

Arthur Young has been criticised by some for being careless and inaccurate. But even by the standards of one of his fiercest critics, William Marshall, the report on Hertfordshire seems to stand up remarkably well. Marshall required, amongst other things, that reports have good coverage of the area, that the author has good local knowledge, and that his contacts be of a high quality (Wilmot, 1996: 110). The examples already given regarding enclosure, taken from the north, south east, and west of the county, together with the many records made throughout the report, demonstrate good coverage. Also having spent many years farming in the county, he probably possessed good local knowledge. Many of his contacts too were with the better off farmers, those who were likely to be more forward looking and ready to try new methods. Even though the county appears in the main to have been quite well off, there is a constant struggle to meet the ever growing demand for food, with the land being used to its fullest extent. Young's task therefore was to seek out any new methods, which might help the situation. Unfortunately he failed to find the improvements he was looking for. In fact Hertfordshire suffered from the same problems as many other counties in the south at this time, especially with regard to the condition of the poor: the low wages being paid to workers on the land only adding to the problem (Mingay, 1994: 100). His descriptions of landscape in the south of the county, of small to medium fields enclosed with hedges, still hold true today; although much has disappeared under urban development. He also notes accurately, that in general the land is of poorer quality further north towards the Cambridgeshire border where fields are larger, and the views somewhat bleaker and less intimate. Although the report may have had limited value in the search for ways to increase food production, it does succeed in giving us an accurate picture of rural life in Hertfordshire at the turn of the eighteenth century.

## References

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