

Farming in Cornwall and Ontario

Part 1: Farms in Cornwall c 1830

Richard T. A. Bolitho. August 1997

The late 18th and 19th century saw major changes in Cornish farming and the whole way of life in Cornwall. This talk covers a snapshot of farming and farms as they were halfway through the Industrial Revolution. It is not complete, and those whose interest I hope to arouse should read further. The Bibliography appended is a good starting point. In particular you should read A. K. Hamilton Jenkin's "Cornwall and its People" from which much of the information for this talk is taken.

In some respects, such as mining technology, Cornwall was ahead of the remainder of the country. However, in agriculture it lagged. Land ownership patterns and poor communications contributed to this. However relatively rapid changes did take place. I attempt here to paint a picture of Cornish farms and farming as it was about 1830 - just before many of your relations and perhaps your ancestors emigrated to Canada, the United States and Australia.

Farms in Cornwall were not clustered in villages in the Anglo-Saxon pattern. They were distributed over the countryside. Originally villages did not exist unless there was a strong local reason such as a quarry, mine or fishing cove. "Church Towns" often consisted of only two or three houses clustered near the church. Farmhouses were located where there was shelter from the prevailing south-west winds either in a hollow or behind a tree belt. The existence of a water source was also important - usually from a spring or a stream. Wells were difficult to construct and yielded small quantities of water. The farm, cottages and buildings were known as the "town". In some places the Town included two or three farms. In East and North Cornwall most of the land was still owned by large estates whose origins dated back to the Norman conquest and perhaps before. By contrast in West Cornwall and The Lizard the estates were smaller, and much land was owned by individual families.

In the late 18th century farms were often only 45 acres (English) or less. Living was at a subsistence level and was largely self-supporting. Butter and vegetables were sold in the local market towns, as were the fat Cornish cattle and pigs. The main export trade was of coarse wool from the Cornish sheep. There was some export of grain to provision ships. Transport of goods which had been

entirely by pack horse or mule was slowly being superseded by ox (and later by horse drawn) carts as roads were improved. Until the 1780's personal movement was by walking or by horseback, but carriages and passenger vans had been introduced where roads were adequate. Farm fields were irregular in shape as determined by the contours, drainage, and the quantity of stones. They were bounded by Cornish hedges built with rows of field stone and filled with the stony earth dug from the drainage ditches beside them. Ploughing in the shallow soil was with a wooden steel shod plough drawn by a team of eight oxen. All seed had been broadcast by hand, but the horse drawn seed drill was introduced and saved much seed. All grain was still cut with sickles and bound by hand using straw into sheaves. The sheaves were stacked in the field in "hand mows" (or small ricks) to dry. These mows were thatched with flailed straw and remained until moved to the barn to be flailed and winnowed. "Late" potatoes and turnip were grown for home consumption over the winter. The Napoleonic wars caused a boom in the price of barley and wheat. There was a strong incentive to increase yields. Concurrently scientific studies showed the value of fertiliser and lime in increasing yields. Calcareous sand was brought in from the north coast dunes and from local beaches. Bone meal was imported or purchased from slaughterhouses. Seaweed and fish wastes were collected, and the value of farm manure was recognised. At his time the draft ox was slowly replaced by the horse - although it took one hundred years to complete the change. The horse was far faster but required more care and attention. By importation of better English breeds and by scientific breeding, great improvements in cattle, sheep and pigs were taking place.

After the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, agriculture went into a deep depression. Advancing mechanization -including machine threshing - reduced the need for farm labour. Even then, farmers could not pay the subsistence wage, and farm labourers were often paid in kind. Sometimes the farm labourer rented four to six milking cows with free grazing of 1¼ acres per cow from which he and his wife lived by selling the butter produced. In addition, the expansion of the mines drew many of the labourers where they had the opportunity (even if remote) to accumulate significant sums of money. As a result, there was a severe shortage in agricultural labour. Landlords found that when leases became due for renewal an increase in size of farms was essential to obtain economic rents for their land. In some case they paid the cost of emigration to obtain possession of the farm.

With the above in mind I will turn to a typical farm or "town" as it would have been about 1830. Let us imagine approaching a farm via a narrow lane enclosed by high hedges. The first buildings might be a pair of whitewashed thatched cottages at the edge of the lane. These are built with whitewashed cob

walls. The thatch is of dried furze (or gorse). The front door is of "hepse" or two-piece construction. This allows light and air to enter, at the same time keeping the pigs (which roam freely) out. Inside the single room is floored with beaten down lime-ash and covered with loose straw. At one side there is a talfat or sleeping platform raised six feet above the floor. There is a large fireplace in the end wall with a chimney-seat at one side and space for drying turves [or peat] and furze at the other. A brandis (or trivet) stands in the ashes, with a baking iron (a flat metal sheet) beside it. Furniture is limited to a rough table, benches and a dresser, a cooking pot and baking kettle hang from the wall. There is a straw mattress and blankets on the sleeping platform. There is a bunk bed for the growing children in the corner. A baby sleeps in a costan (or straw basket). A pig's crow (or sty) adjoins the cottages

As we continue, the farmhouse comes into view. Facing South-East, the farmhouse (which had been rebuilt during the Napoleonic wars) is of field stone set in mortar. In front there is a low wall with an iron gate. The farmhouse itself is a two-story building about twenty feet wide and forty feet long. There are chimney stacks at each end. At the back is a long lean-to structure. At one end there is a large granite cistern fed from a wood trough leading from the spring. The roof is thatched with straw (or reed). Windows are small but glazed. The front door is approached through a stone porch. The front yard is colourful with sweet william and other flowers.

Stooping to enter the low front door one descends two steps into the front passage. At one side is the doorway to the parlour or "halse". Stairs lead to the second floor and a door to the kitchen. The halse has a large fireplace surmounted by a granite mantelpiece. The room is simply furnished with a corner cabinet containing the best china and knick-knacks, table and chairs. The walls are whitewashed and hung with several needlepoint tapestries with biblical quotations and some framed prints. A wood wall separates the room from the kitchen behind. The ceiling is "planced" or boarded over the rafters with no plaster. The floor is of granite slabs. We proceed from the hall into the kitchen. Here the granite floor slabs are dusted with white sand. There is a large fireplace with a massive granite lintel in the end wall (In North Cornwall, this would have been a massive oak beam). There is an open fire with no grate. A brandis stands at the edge of the fire. At one side is an alcove with a supply of turves and dried furze. A cloam baking oven is at the opposite side. Milk in a cloamware bowl is being scalded at the edge of the fire. Furniture consists of a scrubbed table with a bench and a few chairs. A dresser with the earthenware dishes in daily use stands against a wall. Beside the fireplace there is a high-backed settle. Some cured hams and herbs hang from the

ceiling rafters. A "heather" broom (constructed like a corn broom) stands in a corner. Upstairs are four rooms furnished as bedrooms. Two of these have been lathed and plastered. Furniture in the main bedroom is a wooden bed covered by a quilt. There is a chest of drawers and a washstand with basin and chamber pot. The other bedrooms are more simply furnished.

Going out the back door, on the left is a door to the larder. The windows being screened with muslin. On the right there is a dairy. This has stone slab shelves (granite or slate) for the cloam bowls of milk. In the back yard is a stone building housing the privy and beside it stacks for furze, turf and firewood.

Across the yard is a two-story barn with granite steps to the upper floor. There is a stable below. The range of buildings is continued by the single story shippen and pig sties. These buildings have small windows many stuffed with straw. The roof is thatched with furze. The walls are field stone at the base with cob above. Hens peck in the unpaved yard. Beyond the yard is a fenced enclosure with several stacks of hay and straw.

I hope I have given you a picture of farming and farms in West Cornwall as they were one third of the way through the 19th century. Those of you from a farming background may compare your experience with what I have described. When you visit Cornwall stop and look at the countryside. Put yourself back 160 years and imagine what conditions were like then.

Bibliography

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Part 2: Farming in Cornwall and Ontario

Francis Jose, August 1997

Having farmed for many years, whenever we travel, we are always observing the crops and farming methods we see in other areas. When traveling in England today we see much of the same machinery and farming methods that we are familiar with in Ontario. In the early part of the last century conditions were very different. While doing research at the CRO in Truro, several years ago we discovered that my great grand parents had leased a farm in Davidstow before coming to Canada in 1856. On visiting the farm, we found the present owners had a packet of documents relating to the farm including the lease signed by my great-grandfather Henry Jose in 1848. We took several photos of the lease and had one enlarged but were able to read only part of the old script. This spring we wrote to the farm owners and asked if it would be possible to have the lease photocopied for us. Recently we received this copy which had been produced by their solicitor. It has been copied in pieces and pasted together and we have been able to read every word except one. The regimentation and detail expressed in this document amazed us. We have had considerable experience both in renting land from neighbouring farms and renting out our farm since we sold our dairy herd and have never had more than a verbal agreement. The lease states what crops can be grown and what cannot be grown and the number of years that a crop can be grown on the same parcel, also that each field must be manured at specified intervals and what other fertilizers can be used. It also includes conditions for hunting, hawking, fishing and fowling. I have tried to relate the annual rental charge to present values and I believe the cost with inflation considered would probably be half the cost of purchase of similar farm property in Ontario today and perhaps equal to or more than the cost of purchasing farmland in Canada at that time.

During the period from 1820-1860, several thousand farmers emigrated from England to Upper Canada. Those who settled in this area were mostly from Cornwall or Yorkshire with the largest number from Cornwall. In Cornwall it seems the land had been farmed for generations or centuries, in Ontario only a small part of the land had been cleared of forest before 1850. We have contracts for the clearing of the land on our farm in the mid 1850's. One of the contrasts must have been the availability of specialized tradesmen such as blacksmiths, carpenters, weavers, spinners etc. It appears these were common in England in the 19th century but the early settlers generally had to learn the various skills themselves.

In the first half of the last century there were few farm implements available in Europe or North America. The plow and harrow pulled by horse or oxen seem to be the only equipment other than hand tools common before 1850. The threshing machine driven by horsepower was invented about 1840, but most threshing was still done by hand flail until the latter part of the century. Records indicate that workmen usually received 10% of the crop for threshing the grain with a flail. Daniel Massey whose small machine shop grew into the world wide Massey-Ferguson Company opened for business half a mile from here on Mill Street, Newcastle in 1847. Within a few years the company headed by his son Hart Massey was producing a variety of farm implements and was exporting them to Britain and Europe. In the early years of agricultural mechanization, it seems that most of the machinery was developed in Canada or the U.S.A. More recently, however, many pieces of specialized farm equipment have been invented in Britain, Sweden, and Central Europe.

Barn construction has been a puzzle for me. It seems that most farm buildings in England were one storey structures usually built of stone or brick. In Canada the early barns were of wood construction, which was readily available, but were mostly two storey buildings with feed storage in the upper level and the livestock in the stable below. Why did the early settlers build a different type of building than they were accustomed to in England?

Another aspect of rural life is the country fair. In England and Europe, the fair was basically a market for farm produce often accompanied by entertainment. In Canada the country fair denotes a competitive exhibition rather than a market. The origin of fairs in Ontario began with the first agricultural society in Niagara in 1792. This organization was formed to promote agriculture and to assist farmers in importing improved seed and livestock from the U.S.A. and Britain. During the 1820's and 1830's many of these organizations were organized across Upper Canada (Ontario), for the same purpose. From this beginning the competitive fair evolved to encourage farmers to grow better crops and breed more productive livestock. Entertainment including harness horse racing became an important aspect of most local fairs. In fact, in the latter part of the 19th century, horse racing was a common source of year round entertainment. The first provincial fair was held in Toronto in 1846. In 1848 the provincial fair was held in Cobourg. This fair reported a one-day attendance of seven thousand persons in a town of two thousand situated in a sparsely populated area nearly ten years before the first railroad was built and the only access was by nearly impassable roads or by boat.

Some interesting changes have taken place in Canadian livestock industry during the past forty or so years. As we mentioned during the last century Canadian farmers imported livestock of all types from Britain and in some breeds this continued well into this century. Since WW2 this trend has reversed, and Britain and Europe have become a lucrative market for Canadian dairymen especially Holstein breeders with thousands of cattle being exported overseas. More recently the shipment of cattle has largely been replaced by bull semen and live embryos, a much cheaper method of transporting breeding stock. European cattlemen have been so successful in improving their herds with the breeding stock imported from Canada and the U.S., that once again some seed stock is being imported from Europe to Canada, now in the form of semen.

I hope these rambling observations point out some of the similarities and differences in farming in Canada and England and Cornwall in particular