

FLOCKMASTERS AND SHEPHERDS OF BRATTON

Much of the wealth of England in general, and Wiltshire in particular, was based from the 14th century onward on wool. Not for nothing is the seat of the Lord Chancellor in the House of Lords a woosack, symbol of trade and power. Huge flocks of sheep roamed over Salisbury Plain, tended by skilled, devoted shepherds. Every swift stream in Wiltshire had its woollen mills, powered by great water-wheels, until well into the 19th century. Arthur Young, writing in 1768, said : "The flocks of sheep they keep on the Plain, I believe, are the greatest in England; they run in number from three and four hundred to 3,000, fold them the whole year round, and shift the folds every night . . . I never saw so good sheep walks as all this country; the verdure is good, and the grass, in general, fine pasture, without a hedge, tree or hut, and inhabited only by a few shepherds and their flocks."

Near the edge of this great Plain lies Grant's Farm, Bratton, which was farmed by the Whitakers from 1686 to 1913. It was owned by them until about 1840, and when it was sold in a period of recession, Philip Whitaker remained as tenant farmer. He was succeeded by his son, Joshua, who gave up the old flock of South-downs, and founded a flock of Hampshire Downs. At his death in 1864, his son, John, became the next tenant, and farmed until he retired in 1913. All were famous corn-growers and flock-masters. John was one of the judges at the Bath and West Show.

The farmstead lay in a hollow in the north-western part of Salisbury Plain, sheltered by beech trees, and reached by a long lonely chalk road. It was a picturesque group of buildings, the old farmhouse flanked by thatched cottages, stables, barley-mow, high cart-shed, and corn barn standing on staddle stones. Near-by was a great sycamore tree, and a dew-pond. The main arable crop was barley, and of course, most of the ploughing was done with horses, though oxen were used till late in the last century. An old newspaper cutting records: "Melksham Agricultural Society's annual ploughing match took place at Great Chalfield on Wednesday. The weather was ideal. Twenty-three ploughs were brought to the field. No less than fifteen bore the name Ransome; the rest were divided between Reeves, Attwood and Ball. Only one yoke of oxen was driven (Mr. Whitaker's, of Bratton), but their manager (J. Grant) did so well that he was awarded first prize in the boy's class. At the luncheon which followed the ploughing, speeches were made by Mr. W. H. Long, MP, and Mr. G. P. Fuller. Both spoke in praise of the fine news just received of a victory by our troops fighting in Egypt." (Wilts. Times 16.9.1882).

This is a reference to the Battle of Tel-el-kebir, fought on September 13th. It is also noteworthy that the firm of Reeves, who made some of the ploughs, is a small Bratton business, founded in 1808 and still in existence. They still give excellent service to local farmers. Their iron and brass foundry closed some years ago, but they still manufacture seed-drills and other agricultural implements, and do most of the repairs on farm machinery.

Farmer Whitaker's sheep, about 1,000 in number, were cared for by Shepherd Charles Whatley for over fifty years. He had ten sons who all became noted shepherds. Robert Whatley followed in his father's footsteps at

Grant's Farm. 11e was a very reserved, silent man, and utterly devoted to his sheep. One morning the farmer noticed he seemed very upset, and enquired what was wrong. Robert could only point across the plain to where a dead sheep lay. It had fallen on its back in a little hollow, and could not get up again. In a broken voice, the shepherd said : "I've worked for you forty years, Maister, and I never lost you a sheep yet, till now."

There was an annual Sheep Fair in September on the Downs above Bratton White Horse. A news cutting dated 11th September, 1858, reported : 'The Westbury Hill Sheep Fair took place on Tuesday last, and was exceedingly well attended. Nearly 400 sheep were penned.'

Old people remember how the sheep came from as far away as Dorset and Hampshire, and there were ponies from the New Forest, too. Everyone went to see the animals, and the stall and sideshows. One old man sold bootlaces, which he sliced from a great leather hide as required. Another sold all sorts of trashy knick-knacks. An old woman sold gingerbread, "rather dry and stale", says an old villager. Another sold cold plum duff, which she scooped out of a tin in sticky handfuls at 3d. a lump. It was a day of excitement and enjoyment, and, some thought, moral danger. There was a bequest, made in 1775, of one guinea to be paid yearly for a special sermon to warn the young people of Bratton against the dangers of the Hill Fair.

The most famous of Shepherd Charles Whatley's sons was Frank "Farmer" Whatley. He was born at Grants Farm in 1857, began to work there in 1867, and spent his whole working life on these downs. He died in Trowbridge at the age of ninety-five in 1953. He was a "vet" as well as shepherd, and much in demand all over the county. He wore his shepherd's smock with pride long after they had fallen into general disuse, and was a well known figure at all the local markets. Farmer Whatley was proud of his skill as a shepherd, and boasted about his dogs. Once, for a wager, he herded a huge flock of sheep on to the chalk surface of the Bratton White Horse on the steep hillside, and with the aid of his dogs held them there long enough to win the bet. When he finally retired from work, he and his father had tended sheep continuously in the district for one hundred and thirty years.

Grant's Farm now lies within the Imber Range, its fields are scarred by tank tracks, its trees splintered by gunfire, and its buildings ruinous. Nothing remains of this fertile and prosperous farm. Soon, as the old people pass away, not even the memory of its sheep shearings and harvest homes will remain.

I am deeply indebted to the long memories of Mrs. E. Reeves and Miss J. S. Whitaker, daughters of the last Farmer Whitaker; to the Women's Institute Scrapbook of Bratton; and to old cuttings from the Wiltshire Times in my possession, for the facts in this account.

This photograph shows a familiar scene in Bratton at the end of the last century, when great flocks of sheep came down from the farms on Salisbury Plains for the sheep dipping. Stradbrook, now a weed-grown shadow of its former self since the Water Board tapped the springs at its source, was then a swift flowing stream, dammed at intervals along its course to provide water power for three woolen mills and a corn mill in the village of Bratton. All have long since gone out of use. In the foreground of the picture James Prior, John Burgess and Frank Whatley hold sheep under the wooden spouts which directed the flow of water over them. Among the

spectators are Jane Couldrake, Mary Pepler and Florence Burgess (Mrs. Frank Lawrence). Perhaps readers could identify some of the others.



A little further down the stream, just out of sight on the left of the picture, was a brick “bunney” or small foot-bridge, which has only recently been destroyed, and a few yards further on were steps with hand-rails, visible behind the sheep, which led down to the pool where the local Baptists were baptised. Immediately behind the steps can be seen the Wesleyan Chapel which was demolished in 1956. The building to the right of it, then two cottages, has been converted into one. Otherwise the houses remain unaltered. On the right is one of the woollen mills. The chimney, engine house and other small outbuildings were demolished in 1909.

(Original source not recorded)