



Agriculture In and Around Westbury

For hundreds of years the land has been farmed in large open areas divided into strips. The land was rented to farmers and peasants by the Lord of the Manor. The poor countrymen eked out a living by keeping a few animals - geese, ducks, or chickens - on common land, and also by spinning and weaving in his cottage.

The ancient parish was divided fairly equally between sheep and cows in the upland areas and dairy and water meadows in the lowland valleys. In the mid-18th century Brook Farm was noted for its cheese. By Georgian times the land owners wanted to be rid of the strip system, so that larger farms could be created and more efficient methods of farming used. Parliament passed a law in 1802 whereby the landowners could force the peasant to give up his strip of land in exchange for a few guineas, or for some land of poor quality in another part of the estate.

In the Westbury area, because of the extensive chalk downs, the principle farming was in sheep and arable, and the enclosure process was relatively slow in coming. By 1790 only half the area was enclosed, the remainder being common for sheep and cattle.

Farmers generally had a cow or two for domestic purposes, their main income being:

Barley and Wheat (sold as far afield as Bristol and Wales)
Lambs
Malt
Wool

Gradually the common land was also enclosed and the woods cut down, removing the areas of free pasture for the poor man's animals.

The new farms grew larger amounts of corn, and prices were high owing to the wars with France, making the land owners very rich people.

The peasants found that the few guineas given for their strip of land did not go very far; even if they managed to buy a little land, life was still very difficult. The removal of the common land meant no free grazing and the woods, which had given them firewood and the odd hare or rabbit for the pot, were now guarded by gamekeepers.

Along with the decrease of home spinning and weaving, life for the poor became very hard. Work as a farm labourer on the gentry's farms became seasonal, leaving months of unemployment. Even the hiring fairs became rare events. Single men were usually the first to be laid off, putting marriage at a high premium. The only relief was parish relief but even this was removed when the oldest child was old enough to be working ie: about 7 years old.

In 1841 there were 134 residents in the workhouse, but ten years later the number had risen to 214, even though the overall population of the town had fallen. The former was attributed to the problems facing the poor, and the latter to emigration caused by the decline in the cloth industry.

The introduction of new machinery eased the workload of the farmer. Mr. T. P. Reeves founded a firm of agricultural machinists supplying improved farm implements, especially a lighter one - wheeled plough. Seed which had previously been broadcast could now be sown in a seed drill, considerably reducing wastage of seed and maximising the use of the land.

Through the invention of the steam engine to the petrol and diesel engines, farming has become a mechanised industry rather than the labour intensive, with a consequent loss of jobs.