

THE EARDISLAND TENANT FARMER¹⁷ of 100 years ago must have been reasonably prosperous. The repeal of the Corn laws in 1846 seems to

have had an unsettling effect on prices for a time, but the figures which we have seen indicate that markets steadied during 1847 and remained so for the next 25 years. (During 1847 the price of Seconds at a local mill went up alarmingly, reaching 18/6d. a bushel in May, and dropping steadily back to 8/- in November and December. A list of the miller's debtors for this year, for grain alone, shows a turnover of just on £1,000 - also the fact that he was sufficiently prosperous to weather a bad debt of £158 to one farmer alone!)

In spite of the draw of higher money in the coalmines of South Wales, and of higher money offered by the up-country farmer to replace the gaps caused by men leaving the farms for the mines, there was never any lack of labour in Eardisland. Whether there were any minor strikes we do not know; but we have heard of one in Weobley Parish sometime around 1890, "but when the barrel of cider was brought on the men turned their backs on the strike". No doubt those who went to the mines had their moments of doubting whether they had been wise in deserting the gentle life of the country, with its many advantages, for the harsher life of the coal valleys.

Directories and Diaries give one the impression that many new tenants came to our farms in the early Seventies, presumably in the belief that the good times would hold. But, alas, they did not and it is said that many lost money and had to move on, some to other work. Indeed, there is a story that at one period only two of the farms on the Burton Court Estate were tenanted. We have not been able to verify this - but we have been able to borrow some most interesting Day Books and Diaries, relating to three different farms, and some very interesting information has emerged. (In the Burton Court Manorial Rolls one reads of a parallel state of affairs in 1350, the year after the Black Death, when reference was made to "10 Holdings remaining in the hand of the Lord" because the tenants and all their heirs had died.)

Tenancy agreements at the beginning of the period seem to have been very harsh, judging by that entered into by Mr. John Thomas of the Stythes Farm in 1873. "No claim for Acts of Husbandry, Tenant Rights or Allowances other than those herein authorised shall be entertained by the Arbitrators". And again: "The Landlord reserves all Game, Rabbits, Fish and Wild Fowl...for the purpose of preserving killing or taking the same." However, the tenant's position seems to have improved later in the Century, and by 1904 (Mr. Kington's Agreement) he was at least allowed to keep down the rabbits on his land!

What astonished us very much was the discovery that land on one farm was assessed in the Forties at £50 an acre; and that rents in the Seventies (and probably earlier) were remarkably high, higher than they were in 1950, when the Burton Court Estate was sold. When Mr. James Kington became the tenant of Gove House Farm in 1876 his acreage was 156 and his rent £265; when his grandson bought the farm in 1950 the acreage was 133 and the rent £171.10.0. Similarly, when Mr. John Thomas took over the tenancy of the Stythes (or Sytches) Farm in 1873, the acreage was 232 and the rent £460; when it was sold in 1950 the acreage was 123 and the rent £195.

Old Rent Books, too, provide a poignant reminder of the periods of agricultural depression in the last Century. We have an entry in Mr. Kington's Rent Book for 1879: "4/- per acre allowance on arable land in consideration of current depression." Later, in 1882, there is an allowance of 15% off the rent, and a further 5% on manure bills - an indication of a situation in which both owners and occupiers were engaged in the task of making both ends meet on vanishing incomes. Land deteriorated in condition; less labour was employed; less stock was kept; bills for cake and fertilisers were reduced." In 1883 and 1884 further

allowances were made for "wet land"; in 1896 an allowance of £20 was made off the rent, and this was allowed until 1906. In 1921 (a sign of better times, which alas were not to last) the rent was raised by 2/- an acre.

There can be no doubt that many farmers went under during those hard years; yet we have been told - and prices do seem to bear this out - that the early 30's of this Century, and particularly 1932, was the worst period of the whole 100 years! We spent literally months extracting prices from farm diaries, and we do not propose to bore our readers with lists of stock prices from year to year. The fact does emerge, however, that prices, after rising for a period covering some years before and immediately after the First World War, did drop back, and we find small pigs being sold in 1932 at 9/6d., the price for 1858 (when wages and overheads generally were about one-third of the 1932 figure) being 9/6d. Ewes in 1859 sold at £1.10.0.; in 1932 they were making as little as £1.5.0. With cattle, however, comparison is less striking. In 1847 we have bullocks making £5.10.0. and £8.8.0.; in 1875, £11.12.6d.; in 1900, £10.17.6d.; in 1906, £18; in 1920, as much as £44.10.0.; in 1934, £16 for a 10 cwt. beast, and in 1936 as little as £16.10.0. for a 9½ cwt. beast. One local farmer with a reputation for his cattle told us that in April, 1936, he bought 11 yearling bullocks at an average weight of 6 cwts., average cost £10.12.6d.; he sold them Leominster in October, average weight 9½ cwts., at £16.10.0. "That was a lot of money in those days," he said. In 1941 he sold cattle at 68/- per cwt., and now, in 1955, the price has been as high as 185/- per cwt.

During the hard periods it was the farmer with ready money who weathered the storm, and for this reason the farmer's wife was very much his business partner. In fact one farmer, whose father used to farm about 450 acres in this and the neighbouring Parish, has told us that but for his mother his father would never have pulled through in the 80's and 90's; and it was taken for granted that his mother's contribution to the family exchequer would pay the wages of all the 8 men they employed!

This she did from her sales of butter, eggs, and poultry - "and with eggs as low as 40 for 1/-." They kept 8 to 10 cows, and she had as many as 130 turkeys and 100 geese at a time, besides ducks and hens. Every Friday she had her stand in Leominster Market, and there she sold her produce, bringing home at the end of the day the much-needed money to pay the men.

All the help she had was one living-in maid. You can be sure that they were both up at crack of dawn for, in addition to all the work with the poultry, they would have several living-in men to feed. Then there would be the cows to milk - a job always done by the women. At one o'clock the men would come in to dinner, and at seven o'clock to supper. In between times there would be the usual household chores, with no conveniences as we know them; baking bread, churning butter; doing the household washing, and of course the household mending. She would also, probably, make her own cheese. For the women, as much as for the men, it was a seven-day week.

On the smaller farms the women had to be as efficient at farm-work as the men, for they often had to help and sometimes a woman would be employed by the day for both housework and farm-work. In Mr. Thomas's Day Book for the years 1874 to 1878 we find that Betty Moore and Betsy Williams, besides helping very

occasionally in the house, did the following jobs on the farm: "hoeing peas, working in garden, spreading dung, turning dung, mowing clover, hoeing clover, cutting thistles, cocking clover, tedding hay, breaking hay, transplanting mangolds, hoeing mangolds, cocking peas, cocking oats, binding wheat, picking stones, picking fruit, helping at straw, steam-thrashing, raising mangolds, laying clods, dressing ground, gathering scutch, sorting potatoes, leading to drill, cutting potatoes, weeding wheat, singling mangolds, winnowing beans, cider-making, filling mangolds, pulling swedes (sweding), mending bags, washing apple trees, gathering chats, scraping fold, cleaning swedes."

The farmer's wife would also have to be prepared to deal with her family's ailments, especially in the days before the village Nurse, and there is no doubt that various herbs were used in those days. Marshmallow Leaf for cuts and festers; nettle beer for the blood; horseradish for rheumatism (the roots being boiled in hot water and old beer, and only the resulting juice being used); elderberry flower liquor (the flowers being harvested and then boiled) for colds and warding off pneumonia; an ointment made from lard, for healing wounds; goose-grease for bruises; and (a gipsy cure this), for a wasp-sting in the mouth, as much fresh milk and real honey as the patient can consume'. Other remedies we have discovered are a brew of cider and rosemary, "to bring out the measles spots"; and eel garters and "you'll never get cramp in the legs".

Our housewife would have used a meat-jack - many can remember them being used right up till oil stoves came in, shortly before the First World War. (Indeed, it was not until recent years that most farmhouses became modernised to the extent of having bath-rooms and inside sanitation, and cooking stoves such as the Raeburn, Aga and Eased.) She would always have home-cured bacon and ham, and many farms also killed and salted a bullock every year. But tinned food would not be available till the Nineties (we have records of tinned apricots at 7d. and 10d.) and of course tinned mutton and Corned Beef also were common before 1900. Even so the thrifty housewife would depend on home-cured meat, with an occasional piece of butcher's meat. (From 1843 right up to the 1914-18 War the price of beef seems to have ranged from 4d. to 9d.; of mutton from 6d. to 9d.; and of bacon from 4½d. to 10½d.) Tea 100 years ago would have been a real luxury, hence the locking tea-caddy: and one of our farmers, in 1843, restricted his purchases to half-a-pound a week, at 6/- a lb. At this time, and for a long time to come, tea was a real luxury, and it was usual to brew a fresh pot of tea only on Sundays. From 1900 tea could be bought as low as 2/- a lb.

We were fortunate enough to lay hands on the Butter Account of Riverside Farm for 1875 (Mrs. Kington) and for 1935 (Mrs. Griffiths). Unfortunately, however, Mrs. Kington's account ran for only 7 months in this particular book, from April till October, so we were unable to compare Winter production at the two periods. What did interest us, however, was the fact that prices were slightly better in 1875 than in 1935 (1/- to 1/4d.), and Mrs. Kington's sales for the 7 months (at 1/1d. to 1/5d., but, alas, number of cows not known) amounted to just on £60, whereas Mrs. Griffiths' sales (6-7 cows) came to just on £35.

As to poultry prices, a dressed fowl seems never to have made more than 2/6d. in those days; gulls, 1/- to 1/8d.; turkey (1893) 9/-; and geese anything from 4/- (1863) to 8/- (1893). However, we are told by one farmer's wife that as recently as 1938 she

sold geese at 6d. a pound. Another entry we found (1899) was: "200 eggs and 7½ lbs. butter, 14/1d."

However, if our farmer's wife got very much less for her produce than she would to-day it is equally true that her household furnishings would cost considerably less. In 1886, for example, she could have had a Pembroke table made for her (and by an excellent craftsman, now alas dead) for 18/8d.; a Dining table and bench for £1.18.0., and an oak Writing table with drawers for £3. She would probably buy cloth by the bale for making costumes, coats, etc. for herself and her daughters, and the boys' and men's clothing would be bought (ready-made or tailor-made) in Leominster, though they might have patronised the village tailor, or even have a travelling tailor live in for a week or two and do all the tailoring required. The boys would go to school dressed in Norfolk jackets, with stiff collars; the girls would wear white pinafores, and all would wear black stockings and black boots. Best clothes for Sundays was an absolute 'must' for a farmer's family in those days, and it is likely that all members of the family would go to Church twice on a Sunday.

One of our older residents can recall (as recently as 1900) wearing three different stages of mourning for her mother. For the first 12 months she wore black dresses, trimmed with black crepe; for the next 12 months, black dresses with black braid, and after that, for at least a year, grey only.

As to the men of the family, in spite of the coming of a degree of mechanisation as long ago as 1870 or earlier, it must have been a hard life and hours of work were long. Some of the men's jobs recorded in Mr. Thomas's Day Book (1874) are worth mentioning:

"tending thatcher, skimming, winnowing, glatting, striking reens, turning stubbles, scubbling, hauling marl, hauling lime, hauling sidings, scabbing and dressing cattle, gathering scutch, shearing, putting in hurdles, planting quick, twyfallowing, and floating. What floating was no one has been able to tell us! But it seems clear that in those days it was the practice to fold the sheep, probably in the turnips; and another interesting entry is "skuffling orchard for oats", the practice of growing a grain crop in the orchards having gone out. Other entries indicate that both a reaper and a steam-thrashing machine were available near at hand, and the Directory of 1876 mentions one George West as having been a "thrashing machine proprietor".

Until comparatively recent times our farmers could not get on the telephone to the Vet. when an animal was off-colour, so he had to be something of an alchemist, and old diaries record some rather quaint cures:

"Swelling in Cattle. 3½ drams gunpowder in one pint of skimmed milk chilled.

For Cough. 1 pint of linseed oil, 4 ozs. of Barbados Tar, 2 ozs. of Assefettids (?) Dose, 3 tablespoonsful.

For Gripes. 1 pint of linseed oil, 2 ozs. of Sweet Nitre, 1 oz. Opium, 1 oz. Aloes. Two doses.

For broken knees. 3d. Tincture of Arnica,

Horse with Sore Legs. 2 oz. sulphur, 2 oz. paraffin, ½-pint linseed oil.

For cracked Heels. 1 oz. Gallards Extract, 2 oz. olive oil.

A common practice, too, was to bleed horses that seemed off-

colour. This consisted in sharpening a hazel twig and piercing the roof of the animal's mouth at the third bar. The farmer who told me this said it was the practice till quite recently - "in those days animal life was studied much more than to-day" - and he believes it was extremely effective.

Another recipe which we liked - especially its title - was "A Cure for a Stinking Cask":

"Take 8 or 9 clots of hot lime, break them and put in at the bung-hole, dry. Then boil about 4 pails of water with some walnut-tree leaves. Let the water boil half-an-hour, then put the water in the cask and bung it close. Shake it well, turn it on one end, after standing 6 hours. Turn it end for end every 6 hours for 24 hours. Let out the lime, then fill it with cold water and let stand 24 hours. Then let out the water and it is fit for use."

Another one we chanced on was for a Grafting Wax. This was "Equal parts of Burgundy Pitch and Red Ochre, and Double the Quantity of Resin. Melt together and apply with brush when warm

In former days there were many more orchards than to-day, and the income from cider (always from 5d. to 7d. a gallon) and fruit was important to the farmer. In 1881, for example, Mr. Thomas of the Stythes made £110 on his fruits and nuts alone, - despite the fact that he was selling damsons at 12/- the pot; pears at 5/- the cwt.; cider fruit at 2/9d. the bag, and Princess Pippins and Blenheims at 7/6d. the cwt. *

We are told that binders of British manufacture were being used by some of our farmers in the early 80's, but they required 4 horses to draw them, whereas their American counterpart, the Massey-Harris, required only 2. The first Massey-Harris arrived in the Parish in 1889. It was assembled in the Old Hopyard Field, belonging to the Court House Farm, by Mr. Alfred Hope of Weobley, then a boy of 16, and this field was the first to be cut by it. One can imagine the tremendous excitement this innovation must have caused in the Parish, and Mr. Hope's pleasure in his considerable mechanical achievement in an "unmechanical" age.

Another of Mr. Hope's memories is of leaving Eardisland at 11 o'clock at night, to drive the cattle to market in Hereford, arriving for the opening of the market at 6 a.m.

Ask Mr. Hope, or any old Eardisland folk, if they were hard times, and the answer will come: "Hard, yes - but far happier!" And there is no doubt that the farmer and his family did seize every opportunity for enjoyment that came to them. Village Concerts - often they had to perform - Harvest Homes, Shearings, Thrashings... all the occasions when neighbours and extra men came to help and one celebrated the end of a job well finished. The Kingtons remember hearing about the Harvest Homes held in their granary, when music was supplied by a fiddle and a melodion and Mr. Harvey attended what he believes was the last Harvest Home in Eardisland, held at Hinton in 1903, when the bill of fare was goose, plum pudding and apple dumplings, washed down with a copious supply of cider, and with dancing to the melodion to follow.

But Mr. Hope's happiest memory of all was the Burning of the Bush. Everyone was up before daylight and there was a copious supply of gin and cider for every man to take out with him.

as now no orchards on the Stythes farm.

22.

The Bush (of hawthorn) had been taken down from the nail in the kitchen ceiling the night before; and next morning (New Year's Day?) the fire was lit in the "first field of wheat", the bush was burned, and the new bush was shaped and held over the flames for a few seconds, before being taken in to the kitchen to replace the old one. Most of us will agree that it is a pity that those old customs and social occasions have been allowed to die out, helped on their way no doubt by this era of war, high prices and "canned" entertainment.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX