

AGRICULTURE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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For the seven years following 1696, so calamitous was the weather that the corn rarely ripened, and the green, withered grain was shorn in December amidst pouring rain or pelting snowstorms. In trying, even in the months of January and February to reap the remains of their ruined crops of oats, many of the starving people perished from weakness, cold, and hunger, while sheep and cattle died in thousands, and the prices of everything soared so high that men and women were forced to prowl and fight for their food like beasts.

In these disasters the superstitious people read the fulfilment of the prophetic utterances of Covenanting leaders like the godly Donald Cargill who, on one occasion when preaching in the neighbourhood, had not only foretold his own fate, but had warned his hearers that they should "see cleanness of teeth and many a pale, blue face which shall put thousands to their graves in Scotland with unheard of natures of fluxes and feavers, and otherwise, and there shall be great distress in the land and wrath upon the people." None dared to doubt the inspiration of such a portentous prophecy.

In the opening years of the 18th century the parish presented little that was picturesque to the eye. Roads were but ill made tracks dangerous alike to man and horse. The country was treeless and bare; the land was marshy and full of bogs. There were then no meadows with flocks feeding, but wild moors stretched far and wide, and here and there were patches of tilled land, cultivated by teams of eight or ten oxen tethered to a primitive wooden plough.

Pease, barley, and oats were the crops grown. It was not until the middle of the century that turnips, which had been introduced into England from Holland for field cultivation in 1716, were sown to any great extent. The same reluctance was shown in adopting potatoes as a produce of the fields, but by 1750 they were coming into general cultivation. The style of farming and the utter ignorance of, prejudice against, every rational method of cultivation, which persisted until the middle of the century, made, it often impossible, even in a good season, for farmers to provide sufficient food for the people. There were no enclosures, neither dyke nor hedge, between the fields or between the farms, so that when, crops were growing and, harvest in progress: the cattle had either to be tethered or tended, by herds. When the harvest was over the cattle wandered everywhere, reducing the land to a very sodden condition.

After the second half of the century had opened old prejudices began to lose their hold and primitive methods of cultivation to be superseded. Where formerly farms had been let without eases or on very short tenure, they were now leased for periods of, nineteen years on condition that the farmer carried out intelligent modes of agriculture, with regard to liming, ploughing, sowing, the use of artificial grasses, and the due rotation of crops.

Under this new system fields were enclosed, ground, was drained, limed and manured, and the spectre of famine removed by the increased productivity of the soil.

From Sir John Sinclair's Statistical Account of Scotland, published in 1793, it is learned that the old distinction of "infield" and "outfield", still survived in the parish:

Under that system the land nearest the house, called the "croft" or "infield," received all the care. Whatever manure was used was put upon the infield, to improve which, the farmer would even un-thatch his peat covered home. Several times larger was the "out field", which received little attention. In the last quarter of the century the latter, after lying a few years in pasture, was cropped with oats for two or three years, and again left to rest.

Upon the "crofts" the seeds of clover and rye-grass were coming into use and a crop or two of hay taken from them. After the land had been down to grass for two or three years, it was then cropped with pease, barley, and oats in rotation. Although there was abundance of lime to be had within the parish, it was little used before 1800.

A little wheat was grown at the northern extremity of the parish, but oats were the chief cereal crop. In the twenty years prior to 1793 there had been a considerable reduction in the quantity of oats, but a large amount of good quality barley had taken its place. Little success attended the cultivation of pease, while flax was grown for domestic use only. Orchards were found on Clydeside, as now, but at that date they did not cover a very large area.

Although a start had been made with the enclosure of the lands, there remained several undivided commons of considerable extent on which the adjoining proprietors and farmers had a right of pasturage. Sheep to the number of 7000 were kept in the higher parts of the parish, and the number of cows was about 1600, with 400 calves bred annually. There were then in use on the land 520 horses, and about 100 young horses were reared each year.

Progress was not confined to the working of the soil new carts, with spoke wheels revolving on their axles, superseded the clumsy "sleds," and primitive tools and appliances gave way to machinery. The swing plough, requiring only two horses, displaced the clumsy wooden construction which needed a team of oxen to draw it, while the introduction of the threshing mill was one of the greatest advances made at that period.

Great as these changes were, no less important was the passing of the Turnpike Act of 1751, a measure which assessed farmers and proprietors in equal proportion for the construction and maintenance of efficient public roads.

The growth of industrial communities towards the close of the century and the easy means of communication established under that Act brought the farmers of the parish into touch with new markets for their produce, which now brought very remunerative prices. At the same time the profits from rearing stock rose with great and rapid strides.

Every section of the community benefited by the improvement of agriculture.

The social conditions had changed vastly for the better. The fare of the people was no longer restricted to oat and barley meal diet, but every man was now keenly interested in the cultivation for his own use of turnip, carrots and potatoes in addition to the cabbages and greens which had formerly been the only vegetables to be found in the kail-yards.

Currants and gooseberries had also found a place in the gardens of the cottagers. Farmers and their workers were now well clad and shod, the coarse garments of earlier generations being discarded.

Improvements were going on in the homes as well as in the food and clothing of the agricultural classes, who were beginning to erect houses with chimneys, to let out the smoke and glazed windows to keep out the blast.

By the end of the century heather and gorse were giving way to corn; bogs and marshes, in the draining of which an increasing demand for labour sent up the wages of the workpeople, were turning into pasture; and bleak moorland wastes were gradually being covered with trees. These were some of the changes which were wrought during this period in the physical aspect of the parish.

From Lesmahagow Parish Historical Association Archive.
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