

AGRICULTURE FROM 1800.

By J. L. CARVEL.

(Article 22 of J. L. Carvel's 30 part series of the History of Lesmahagow as published in the Hamilton Advertiser during 1925.)

The years 1795 to 1814 were years of remarkable agricultural prosperity. This was the period of the wars of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, terminating with the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.

The average price of wheat for the whole of that period was 89s 7d per quarter, and in 1812 was as high as 126s 6d. But with the restoration of peace in Europe in 1815 and the re-enactment of the Corn Laws there began an era of severe depression and suffering for the agricultural community.

As nearly one-half of the population of the parish was then engaged in the cultivation of the soil, and another quarter in industries dependent upon agriculture, the general collapse brought many hardships to families within its bounds.

The opening years of last century are note worthy for the number of agricultural societies which were formed throughout Scotland.

In 1805 the Lesmahagow Farmers' Society, whose object was "the encouragement of farmers in rearing, breeding, and improving their stock, and other agricultural improvements," was instituted. A large measure of support was given to the society from the very first and throughout its whole history down to the present day it has included in its membership the progressive farmers in the district. Its rules were amended in 1850, and the constitution of the society to-day is practically the same as it was when the rules were again revised in 1862.

In its early days two public meetings were held each year, the first on the last Friday of June for the exhibition of farm stock of all kinds, including poultry and agricultural implements, and the second on Lammas Fair Day in August for the show of dairy produce. An annual ploughing match was also held under the auspices of the society on the first Wednesday in February or on the first favourable Wednesday thereafter.

There is now only one summer, fixture on the first Saturday in June. Since the discontinuance in 1893 of the separate dairy show in August, the appeal of the annual event in June has been widened, until to-day its schedule is representative of almost every branch of rural enterprise. The annual ploughing match is no longer held under, the auspices of the society, hut is run by a separate Farmers' Committee on the last Wednesday in January.

In the first half of last century considerable advances were made in the raising of livestock, farmers finding it more profitable to breed cattle than to grow grain. Ayrshire cattle have been the favourites since the first, and the making of Dunlop cheese became a common industry throughout the parish.

Mr Andrew Smith of Fauldhouse, who prepared the Second Statistical Account of the parish in 1834, estimated that "300lb. weight (of cheese) may be made from each cow when the whole milk is turned to that account, and on some farms, with careful hands, that quantity is raised, and a number of young stock reared, which goes to uphold the original stock, or to supply the English and other markets with that breed of cattle." Pigs and sheep were also found in increasing numbers.

The work of enclosing and of draining the lands, which had been begun towards the close of the previous century, was continued, and by 1834 some hundreds of miles of Galloway stone dykes had been built in those parts where hawthorn and beech hedges could not thrive.

The latter were by that time to be found in the lower and more sheltered parts of the parish. Surface drains costing £1 per 2000 yards run made available much land for grazing and considerably improved the pasturage.

In 1834 the ratio of the raw produce (exclusive of the pasture lands) raised in the parish was estimated as follows:

20,000 qrs. of grain at 25s.		£25,000
600 acres of potatoes at £14		8,400
50 acres of turnips at £14		700
1,200 tons of hay at £ 3		3,600
300 tons of meadow hay at £ 2		600
Thinnings of woods		400
Cutting of coppice		250
	Total,	£38,950

With the passage of years development increased. The establishment of tile-works at Corehouse, Auchenheath, and Kirkmuirhill for the manufacture of pipe tiles, which had formerly to be brought from outside the parish bounds, brought within easy reach of all the essentials to sound drainage, which in 1860 cost from £8 to £10 per acre.

Subsequently, land was systematically drained, and open ditches, were increased in the moorland areas. Simultaneously, with the progress made in increasing the productivity of the soil, rents were increased, but landlords were not loth to improve the steadings of their tenants, and healthy and convenient buildings took the place of the poor, in-sanitary dwellings which had been so common in the first half of the century.

During the past sixty years much new land has been brought under the plough, and the following table provides comparison of the acreage under different crops in the years 1863 and 1924:-

Crop.	Acres.	
	1863.	1924.
Wheat.	73¾	6
Barley,	504	7
Oats	3,949¼	3,468
Potatoes.	478½	507

Turnip and Swedes.	834¾	1,046
Hay (all descriptions).	2,328¼	3,758
Total, - -	7,715	8,792

For the same years the number of life stock carried were as follows:-

Description.	Number.	
	1863.	1924.
Cattle.	5,303	7,574
Pigs.	603	446
Horses.	566	764
Sheep.	7,670	14,112

While employment was found on the land for 549 workers in 1863, there were 601 in regular employment in 1924, while 474 additional persons found casual work, chiefly on fruit plantations.

Although orchard fruits have been grown for centuries on Clydeside, it is within comparatively recent times that small fruits have been grown as field crops.

The strawberry was introduced into Lanarkshire about 1860, when a modest beginning was made with the planting of two acres. Its commercial possibilities were soon discovered, and the acreage was increased from year to year, and by 1875 nearly everybody in the Crossford and Kirkfieldbank districts was growing this crop.

Since the opening of the present century the growing of small fruit - strawberries, raspberries, currants, and gooseberries – has extended to other parts until to-day 689 acres are devoted to their cultivation in the parish; which is more than one-third of the area under these crops in Lanarkshire.

This total is distributed among the different crops as follows:- Strawberries, 446 acres; raspberries, 23 acres; currants and gooseberries, 171 acres; mixed. 49 acres. The orchard area, situated exclusively in the Clyde Valley, consists of 12 acres, of apples, 5 acres of pears, 14 acres of plums, 21 acres of cherries, and 60 acres of mixed crops – total 112 acres, nearly one-quarter of the orchard acreage in the county.

The comparative failure of the different fruit crops for several years towards the close of the last century made growers look for a more profitable investment.

The success of the four pioneers of the Scottish tomato industry in other parts of the country had been, the subject of much discussion, and thirty-one years ago the first commercial tomato houses made their appearance in the Clyde valley.

There followed the building of glass-houses, but this did not assume large proportions. Growers showed their native caution in this new enterprise, and as the results justified the initial building, additions were gradually made until to-day every district has its quota of glass-houses to which extensions are now an annual feature.

However dark the outlook for the agricultural industry may be, some satisfaction may be derived from the fact that the average returns from the soil in the parish are, with two exceptions, better than those of some adjacent parishes. The following table gives the average yield per acre of the principal crops for both the Lesmahagow area and the county. The most noticeable feature of the table is the comparatively high yield of oats:

Crop.	Yield per Acre.	
	Parish.	County.
	Average.	Average.
Wheat.	34 bush.	34.9 bush.
Barley.	36 bush.	34.0 bush.
Oats.	54 bush.	42.4 bush.
Hay.	37.3 cwts.	32.6 cwts. (all descriptions.)
Potatoes.	7.0 tons.	8.6 tons.
Turnip and Swedes.	21.0 tons	19.9 tons.

From Lesmahagow Parish Historical Association Archive.
08/04/2009.