

NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF FARMING IN MILTON ABBAS by Andy Case

transcribed by Bryan Phillips from a presentation given to MALHG 4 Feb 2015

Map drawn by Peter Traskey from an original estate map of 1769 commissioned by Lord Milton 1769. No roads, no farms. Some feudal strips still present, some fields owned by tenants of Milton Abbey estate.

Great Down Clump was originally a chalk pit dug to fertilise the clay capped fields. It is a viewpoint and The Needles can be seen on a clear day.

In 1870 a new road was put in by Act of Parliament by Baron Hambro.

Perambulation of the estate by jury.

After the Napoleonic War of 1793 to the Treaty of Vienna 1815 there was a great demand for foodstuffs. Prices rose and farmer's profits too.

Wheat sold for 12s 6d, barley for 6s 0d a quarter. NB 8 bushels to the quarter, 5 quarters to the ton.

Farmers could afford to invest in new equipment and new leases. On dairy farms ditches were dug, drainage and pasture improved.

The practice where the farmer supplied the cows and all the feed (2.5 to 3 cows per acre) in return for an agreed rent per cow. This freed the farmer from daily milking and the dairyman had the dairy house and supported his family by selling butter and cheese and milk fed pigs. This system continued until WW1.

It was on the chalklands that there were the most changes. Enclosure Acts 1759 – 1856 enclosed downland which was brought under cultivation with farmhouses and farmsteads being built. E.g. Long Ash Farm c1780, Long Close Farm soon after.

Baron Charles Hambro owned 9622 acres, gross value £12 000, cf Bankes estate 19 228 acres \$14 985. Estates were earning vast sums cf labourer 10s per week. Small tenant farmers (c30 acres) were forced to make farms of 200 acres and more e.g. Long Ash Farm with much higher rents.

Water meadows were improved or developed by the introduction of 16th Century Dutch methods. The meadow being drowned by winter rains keeps the frost off and when drained earlier grass is achieved to fatten lambs. The best known account of working water meadows was published 1779 by George Boswell of Puddletown. (see <http://www.farm-direct.co.uk/farming/history/watermeadow> and Google Play books https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=nBDZAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=en_GB&pg=GBS.PA22)

The best local example of a working water meadow is at the base of Basin Hill on the south of the A354. Still working after 250 years.

1850 the so called Golden Age of Dorset Farming brought in new farming methods and machinery, better ploughs – at Long Ash Farm Furzey Field the stones caused dislocation of the shoulders of ploughmen.

The feeding of sheep on winter roots for fattening lambs. Breeding of meatier beef cattle, cows yielding more milk and faster fattening pigs. There were many pioneers among the forward thinking landowners during Victorian times, including Sir Edward Hambro and other wealthy families, such as the Torys. who improved the growing and yields of arable crops. John Tory of Turnworth still keeps Dorset Long Horn sheep which his father John and his grandfather Randolph also kept, bred and improved. Records from then and pedigrees are still kept.

In Milton Abbas parish barley was grown on the lower slopes of the downs where sheep were folded. Oats on the top of the down (lower pH).

Improvements were promoted by local Agricultural Societies by competitions. There was one in Milborne St Andrew with ploughing matches which are still held there.

“High Farming” had a dramatic impact on the landscape and economy. Not least the arable land was first, and artificial fertilisers.

Pastures were seeded with clover and drained. The downs were ploughed. (Steam engines, Eddison's steam ploughing Dorchester) and sown to tunips, clover, forage rape, and vetches and fertilised with bone meal, guano and superphosphate.