



Agriculture

Farming has always been one of the major industries in Devon. There are over 10,000 farms, although very few are over 1000 acres. Most of the farms are run as family units with little or no hired labour. The diverse landscape, the hills of Dartmoor and Exmoor, the vast areas of the Culm grasslands to the north and west and to the south and east the highly productive red soils of the lowlands, provide a vast diversity of agricultural uses. Although the county is mostly grassland and grazing, and livestock contributes the majority of the agricultural output, with dairy farming probably making the biggest contribution to farm incomes, cereal crops are grown, albeit mainly for feed. Wheat production has increased, although barley is probably the major crop, and the growing of oats and mixed corn is a very small proportion of its post war size. The mild climate of the county and its good quality water make it an ideal place for growing other types of fruit and vegetables, and several vineyards have successfully been established, producing fine quality wine. Devon has its own distinctive breeds of livestock, the Devon Red and the South Devon are two fine breeds of beef cattle, and its breeds of native sheep include the Devon Closewool, Devon longwool, Exmoor Horn and the White and Grey Faced Dartmoor. Although some of these have now been replaced, or bred with livestock, from other parts of the country.

Farming in Devon at the present time is going through a period of depression, the devastating Foot and Mouth disease and restrictions from both home and abroad, mean that many farmers are finding times difficult and some are leaving the industry altogether. Observations by Robert Fraser, (1794) William Marshall, (1796) and Charles Vancouver, (1808) all writing on agriculture and the rural economy, all show that farming has always been a challenging, although often rewarding occupation to be in.

1. Farms

- *General View of the County Of Devon*
Fraser, Robert
London : C. Macrae, 1794 p. 17

Farms in general are small, from twenty to forty acres being the common run of holdings in this county. Of late the farms are beginning to increase, and one farmer is some times found to occupy two, three, or more, of these tenements; but I found very few farms exceed two or at most three hundred acres.



Image 1 SC 2429, Devonshire Seaton, F Stevens, 1815

2. Ploughing

- *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Devon*
Vancouver, Charles
London: Richard Phillips, 1808 p. 115

The common Devonshire Plough, made by a hedgerow carpenter, and seldom exceeding in cost 15s. irons included, is much used; and candour must allow, that its performance is far superior to what might be expected from the very rude appearance it makes, either at work or lying empty on the ground.



Image 2(a) SC0068, Barnstaple, George Townsend, 1855



Image 2(b) SC2933, Teignmouth, William Spreat, 1850

3. Harvesting

- *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Devon*
Vancouver, Charles
London: Richard Phillips, 1808 p. 145-147

The reaping and harvesting of the wheat is attended with so heavy expense, and with practises of so disorderly a nature, as to call for the strongest mark of disapprobation, and their immediate discontinuance, or at least a modification of their pastime after the labours of the day. The wheat being ready to cut down, and amounting from 10 to 20 acres, notice is given in the neighbourhood, that a reaping is to be performed on a particular day, when as the farmer may be more or less liked in the village, on the morning of the day appointed, a gang consisting of an indefinite number of men and women, assemble at the field, and the reaping commences after breakfast, which is seldom over till between eight and nine o'clock. This company is open for additional hands to drop in at any time before the twelfth hour, to partake of the frolic of the day. By eleven or twelve o'clock the ale or cider has so much warmed and elevated their spirits, that their noisy jokes and ribaldry are heard to a considerable distance, and often serve to draw auxiliary force within the accustomed time. The dinner, consisting of the best meat and vegetables, is carried into the field between twelve and one o'clock: this is distributed, with copious draughts of ale and cider; and by two o'clock the pastime of cutting and binding the wheat is resumed, and continued without other interruption than the squabbles of the party, until about five o'clock, when what is called the drinkings are taken into the field, and, under the shade of a hedge-row or large tree, the panniers are examined, and buns, cakes and all such articles are found, as the confectionary skills of the farmer's wife could produce for gratifying the appetites of her customary guests at this season.



Image 3(a) SC0063, Barnstaple Devon, James Bingley, 1831

After the drinkings are over, which generally consume from half to three-quarters of an hour (and even longer, if such can be spared from the completion of the field), the amusement of the wheat-harvest is continued, with such exertions as draw the reaping and the field together with the close of the evening. This done, a small sheaf is bound up, and set upon the top of one of one of the ridges, when the reapers retiring to a certain distance, each throws his reap-hook at the sheaf, until one, more fortunate, or less inebriated than the rest, strikes it down: this achievement is accompanied with the utmost stretch and power of the voices of the company, uttering words very indistinctly, but somewhat to this purpose: - *we ha in! we ha in!* - which noise and tumult continue about half an hour; when the company retire to the farmhouse to sup, which being over, large portions of ale and cider enable them to carouse and vociferate until one or two o'clock in the morning.



Image 3(b) SC1429, Little Hempston Church, William Spreat, 1842

At the same house, or that of a neighbouring farmer, a similar scene is renewed, beginning between eight and nine o'clock in the morning following, and so continued through the precious season of the wheat-harvest in this country. It must be observed, that the labourers thus employed in reaping receive no wages, but in lieu thereof, they have an invitation to the farmer's house to partake of a harvest frolic; and at Christmas during the whole of which time, and which seldom continues less than three or four days, the house is kept open night and day to the guests, whose behaviour during the time may be assimilated to the frolics of a bear-garden.

4. Hay Making

- *The Rural Economy of the West of England Including Devonshire*
Marshall, Mr
London: G. Nicol, 1796 p. I : 209

The hay harvest of West Devonshire has little to recommend it, as a pattern to other districts. The mowing is in general, ill done. The sith (sic) is short, and laid in, to near the handle. The unavoidable consequence is, the work goes on slowly. Or a line of uncut herbage is left between each stroke. I have seen worse mowing, both of grass and corn, in this district, than in any other. This censure, however, does not apply to the country in general. I have also seen good work in it."



Image 4 SC2409, Belvedere in Powderham Park, L W Martens, 1829

5. Milking

- *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Devon*
Vancouver, Charles
London: Richard Phillips, 1808 p. 332

There are but few dairies in this district; those that are lett (sic) to dairy-men, commonly pay from nine guineas to 10/. Per cow; the produce of which, for the first twenty-two weeks after calving, is stated at six pounds and a half of butter per week; and the remainder of the period, taken at twenty weeks more, one-third of a pound daily, making in whole, for the ordinary time the cow is in milk, about 190 pounds of butter per cow.



Drawn by T. H. Baskin

Engraved by A. W. Chantler

NEW BRIDGE NEAR HOLNE.

ON THE DART

London, F. Jennings & W. Clapton, 1830

Image 5 SC1171, New Bridge Near Holne on the Dar, A McClatchie, 1830

6. Cattle, South Devon

- *General View of the County Of Devon*
Fraser, Robert
London : C. Macrae, 1794 p. 32

A great number of bullocks are reared, kept and fattened in the South of Devon. The yearlings the first year are kept upon straw, except the working oxen and cows, which have hay. In summer they run in pastures, stubble &c. They are of the short horned breed, and have been in the south par of Devon from time immemorial. The best of this breed are excellent milkers, and answer well for either work or fattening. The oxen are generally turned off to fat at five or six years old, and run up to eight, ten and twelve hundred weight. These cattle are larger and heavier than the North Devon breed, the beauty of which is so famed and well known throughout the kingdom.

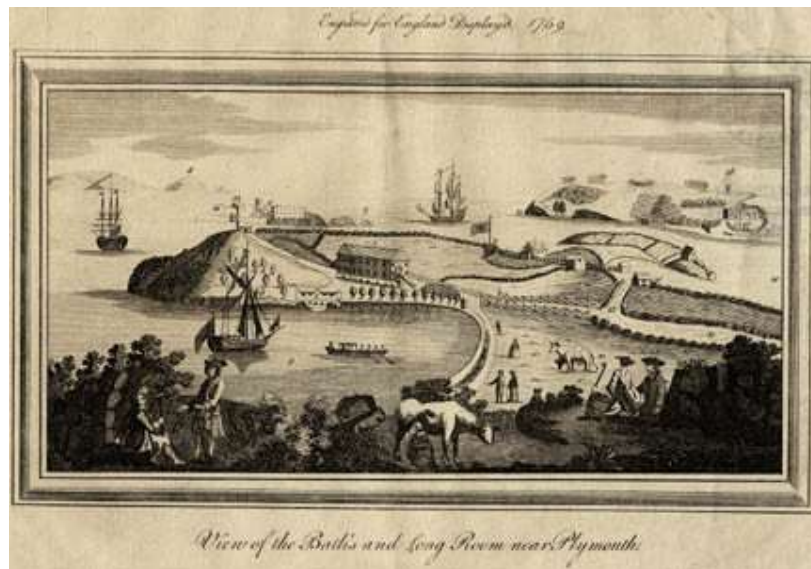


Image 6 SC2132, View of Bath's and Long Room near Plymouth, 1769

7. Cattle, North Devon

- *General View of the County Of Devon*
Fraser, Robert
London : C. Macrae, 1794 p. 33

The North Devon cattle have, at the same time come very much in request, and last year, a heifer was sold as high as thirty pounds. I am however, sorry to find that the high prices given for the best of this breed, tempts the farmers to sell them off, instead of keeping them to improve the stock of the country.



Image 7 SC1759, Newton (pl. 9), H Pyall, 1828

8. Devonshire Cow

- *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Devon*
Vancouver, Charles
London: Richard Phillips, 1808 p. 327-328

The full-sized North Devon Cow, when fattened to its frame, will not exceed eight score per quarter; and the ordinary average of its ox, at five years old, and equally well fattened, must not be rated higher than three score per quarter above the weight of its fattened mother. The form of this animal, its excellencies and defects (for absolute perfection is not to be expected), will now be described, with all the skill and candour possessed and felt by the Author of this Report. Its head is small, clean and free from flesh about the jaw; deer-like, light and airy in its countenance; neck long and thin; throat free from jowl or dewlap; nose and round its eyes, of a

dark orange colour; ears thin and pointed, tinged their inside with the same colour that is always found to encircle its eyes; horns thin and fine to their roots, of a cream colour, tipped with black, growing with a regular curve upwards, and rather springing from each other; light in the wethers, resting on a shoulder a little retiring and spreading, and so rounded below, as to sink all appearance of its pinion in the body of the animal; open bosom, with a deep chest or keel preceding and between its legs; small and tapering below the knee, fine at and above the joint, and where the arm begins to increase, it becomes suddenly lost in the shoulder; line of the back straight from the wethers to the rump, lying completely on a level with the pin or huckles, which lie wide and open; the hind quarters seated high with flesh, leaving a fine hair-ham tapering from the hock to the fetlock; long from rump to huckle, and from pinion of the shoulder to the end of the nose; thin loose skin, covered with hair of a soft and furry nature, inclined to curl whenever the animal is in good condition and in full coat, when it also becomes mottled with darker shades of its permanent colour, which is that of a bright blood red, without white or other spots, particularly on the male; a white udder is sometimes passed over, but seldom without objection.

9. Devonshire Bull

This description may be considered as a summary of the perfections, as to the exterior appearance of the animal: what, under the same head, in judgment of the Surveyor, may be regarded as defects, appear first in the sudden retiring of the vamp from behind the huckle to a narrow point backwards; the great space between the huckle and first rib; the smallness of the angle inwards, at which the ribs appear to be projected from the spine or back-bone, often giving the appearance of a flat-sided animal, and in being so much tucked up in girth, as to show an awkward cavity between the keel and navel, the line of which, it is presumed, should always be found to hold a position as nearly as possible, parallel with that of the back from the wethers to the loin. This animal however, is generally well grown, and filled up behind the shoulder. In a choice of a bull, attention should be paid to these particulars, but his neck ought never be objected to, however thick or high it may rise upon the crest, provided it ends in fine unfleshed vertebres at their insertion with the head.

10. Devonshire Steer

- *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Devon*
Vancouver, Charles
London: Richard Phillips, 1808 p. 330

It has already been noticed, that the steers of the district are always worked as far as the occasion may require. Their labour begins at two years old, when they are broke in and worked gently for the ensuing twelvemonth; from three to four, but more frequently to the ages of five or six, they are put to all the ordinary labours of the yoke; and their day's work at plough or harrow, is usually performed in a journey of about eight hours, during which time the plough-boy has a peculiar mode of cheering them on, with a song he continually chaunts (sic) in low notes, suddenly

broken, and raising a whole octave. The ceasing of the song is said to occasion the stopping of the team, which is either followed by a man holding the plough, or as occasions may require, in attending the drag or harrows.

11. The North Devon Ox

- *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Devon*
Vancouver, Charles
London: Richard Phillips, 1808 p. 330-331

The only comparison to be made between this valuable animal and horses, for labour, is to state the general acknowledgment (sic) of the farmers in the district, who unite in opinion, that on a fair and moderate computation, an ox-team, from the age of three to five years, will increase in its value one shilling per head weekly. In the summer season, these patient animals are taught to forage for themselves in the coarse pastures; in winter they have much the same range, with access to the straw-yard for fodder and for lodging; here they remain for the night, when the condition of the straw-yard is such as not to force them to leave it in search of a more comfortable and drier place.

12. Sheep

- *General View of the County Of Devon*
Fraser, Robert
London : C. Macrae, 1794 p. 33-34

There are to be found in this county both polled and horned sheep. The polled sheep, generally called nott, or knott sheep, are of a large size, with long combing wool; shear on average about eight pounds each. More attention has hitherto been paid to the wool, than to the carcass. The wether sheep run from fifteen to thirty pounds a quarter; the average about seventeen pounds a quarter, nine to ten pounds of fat. Mr Ball of Berry Pomeroy, reckons his wethers at twenty-one pounds a quarter. He keeps about 300 head of sheep, and are, in general, very good of the kind. They sell the wool to combers, and at the fairs in the neighbourhood, at from five-pence halfpenny to six-pence per pound. The nott sheep, I am persuaded, from the great difference I have seen among them are capable of great improvement both in wool and carcass. They cut the lambs in April and judge of the rams they keep for breed by the ewe. They reckon that in stocking with sheep, they ought to keep a sheep to such a quantity of land as in equal to the value of twenty shillings. So that if land is valued at twenty shillings per acre, they ought to keep a stock equal to the number of acres.



Image 12 SC1759, Newton (pl. 9), H Pyall, 1828

13. Exmoor Sheep

- *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Devon*
Vancouver, Charles
London: Richard Phillips, 1808 p. 338

The native sheep of this district [North Devon] is the Exmoor; a horned animal, with a moderately-long staple of wool, which heretofore, and before the cloth manufacture fled from this county into Yorkshire, was much used by the clothiers of North and South Molton, Cullumpton, (sic) Thorverton, Tiverton and other places in the county. The fattened wethers of this breed, at three years old, will usually weigh about 15lbs. Per quarter, and average four pounds and a half of washed wool to the fleece; worth at present about thirteen-pence per pound.

14. Dartmoor Sheep

- *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Devon*
Vancouver, Charles
London: Richard Phillips, 1808 p. 346

The Dartmoor wether at five years old will average about 16lbs. and the Exmoor at the same age about 15lbs. per quarter, and produce from four pounds and a half to six pounds and a half of unwashed wool to fleece. The ewes and lambs, with the preceding year's hog sheep, are brought down from the forests in the beginning of November; in some cases the lambs are not returned with the ewes to the forest

after shearing, but weaned at home in the enclosures, and upon the lower moors and commons in the country.

15. Bampton Sheep

- *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Devon*
Vancouver, Charles
London: Richard Phillips, 1808 p. 342

The sheep most approved in the division of Tiverton, are the Bampton Notts; the wethers of which breed, at 20 months old, will weigh 22lbs. Per quarter, and shear six pounds and a half of wool to the fleece; the same sheep, well wintered, and kept on for another twelvemonth, will average 28lbs. Per quarter, and yield 8lbs. of unwashed wool to the fleece. The present price of this wool is about 1s. per lb.

16. Labourers and wages

- *The Rural Economy of the West of England Including Devonshire*
Marshall, Mr
London: G. Nicol, 1796 p. 1 : 107

The laborers (sic) of the district [West Devonshire] are below par: many of them drunken, idle fellows; and not a few of them may be said to be honestly dishonest; declaring, without reserve, that a poor man cannot bring up a family on six shillings a week and honesty. In addition, however, to these low wages, it is pretty common for farmers to let their constant labourers have corn, at a fixed price; and endeavour to give them piece-work, to be paid for, by measurement, or in gross. Nevertheless, the wages of the District, seeing the great rise in the price of living, appears to me to be to low; and what the farmers save in the expence (sic) of labor, (sic) they would probably lose by pillage, and in the poor's rate.

- *General View of the County Of Devon*
Fraser, Robert
London : C. Macrae, 1794 p. 43-44

Wages are one shilling a day, and a quart of cyder. In harvest, the wages much the same, with as much cyder as they chuse (sic) to drink. Price of threshing wheat, from eight pence to one shilling per bag of sixteen gallons. Threshing barley, from five to six shillings per score bags. Ploughing from five to six shillings per acre, depending upon the quality of the soil situation. Cutting, setting, and steeping hedges, and making up the wood into faggots, from four-pence to ten-pence per yard of eighteen feet. Hours of labour, from six to six in the summer, and from seven to five in the winter.



Image 16 SC1113, Castle Hill in Devonshire the seat of Lord Fortescue, W Watts, 1785

Sources

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