

## Agriculture and Dairy Farming in the Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Turner, Michael. "Agriculture, 1860-1914." *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain Volume II: Economic Maturity, 1860-1939*, edited by Roderick Floud and Paul Johnson, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

By the end of the 1830s the agricultural depression had subsided, and the removal of agricultural protection followed in the mid-1840s. Thus began the period popularly known as high farming. It lasted until the 1870s. Under the economic circumstances that agriculture faced, especially a growing international market in which increasingly British producers became price takers, the prevailing prices that farmers found at their markets were relatively stable. In addition, the productivity changes that had characterised British agriculture and which enable British produces to feed the headlong British population growth had probably reached their limits. This occurred without a substantial recourse to imports or a severe, if indeed any, deterioration in living standards. High farming therefore referred to alternative means by which to raise output and productivity, essentially by increasing the capital component of the inputs, perhaps as a substitute for other inputs, and thereby achieving improvements in productivity. An important additional component is thought to have been improved drainage. From 1845 to 1899, but mostly before 1870, about 4.5 million acres of England were drained. Out of the total acreage of 22-3 million acres this was a considerable investment. With the weight of all this capital investment farming was once said to have entered a 'golden age', a clear reference to healthy crops of sun-ripened grain. [...]

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There was a slump in wheat yields in the 1880s, in line with what became the darkest decade of the agricultural depression. Several years of bad weather injured arable crops, and at times livestock farmers suffered equally when liver fluke and foot rot in sheep was particularly severe. Under normal domestic market conditions these circumstances would have led to a rise in prices, but quite the opposite occurred. British prices were determined now more by external considerations. [...]

The slump in wheat prices was particularly severe and was the main result of Britain's open-door policy. The slump in barley and oats was less severe and the recovery from the 1890s more pronounced because there were alternative markets

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for these two crops, in malting for barley, and as animal feeds for both crops (on farmer responses to relative price movements, even in Essex the supposedly hardest hit depression county). The lighter side of the depression was the relatively better fortunes enjoyed by pasture farmers. The prices for animal and dairy products also fell, though less severely. The price of milk declined, but then recovered. This reflected less the impact of the agricultural depression and more the impact of urban demand, changing diets and the ease of supplying that market once the railway network was completed. In responding to these factors the milk sector had an influence on regional agricultural activity, perhaps to greater degree than any other area of agricultural activity in the second half of the nineteenth century. Butter and cheese, however, both suffered foreign competition and did not

respond by way of technical improvements. Nevertheless, cheese prices recovered, but as much as anything because cheese becomes a much scarcer product with a dramatic decline in regional varieties. English cheese production fell by two-thirds from 1860 to 1910 and while cheese making consumed 40 per cent of milk output in the 1860s, by the first decade of the twentieth century it probably consumed not much more than 5 per cent. [...]

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A benchmark figure for the total agricultural output of the UK is available for 1851 of about £180 million. This value had risen during 'high farming' to £215 million in

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1871-5, but fell thereafter to £172.7 million in 1891-5. This fall of 19.5 per cent represents the full extent of the impact of the great depression. It was particularly evident in arable farming (a fall of 32.2 per cent) relative to livestock and livestock product farming (10.3 per cent).

The five-year average value for output in 1871-5 was abnormally high as a result of a particularly good year in 1874, one of the best years ever and second only to the most productive year, 1868. This may exaggerate the successes of 'high farming'. Yet there was a clear shift in emphasis towards livestock farming and its allied products. These represented 54 per cent of output in the early 1870s, but 64 per cent by 1914. The greatest problem facing the agricultural sector as a whole was the collapse of grain output, and in particular the farmer's traditional cash crop, wheat. It declined from about 11 per cent of gross output in the early 1870s to about 3 per cent by the end of the century, recovering only marginally by 1914. The grains together (wheat, barley and oats) declined from 22 per cent to 11 per cent over the period. The main change in the animal economy was the rise in value of cattle output, and more particularly the rise in the value of milk products. In the early 1870s cattle and milk represented 11.5 and 17 per cent respectively of gross output, but 15 and 24.5 per cent by 1914. Estimates of milk yields varied enormously across the country, but a

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Trend is discernable demonstrating a productivity improvement over time. At a lower level of output, but a significant level of new production, fruit farming also represented something of a success story.

The national farm looked like a mixed farm at the beginning of the period, but ended up in a much more specialised state with cattle and milk together contributing two-fifths of the value of all agricultural output. This was a triumph for adaption: adapt or perish, specialise and survive became important radical ideas for an otherwise conservative agricultural sector.

This trend was already under way. The particularly bad year in 1879 stands out when all the environmental elements conspired against farming; the weather was bad for crops and animals alike, and then the drift into deep depression in the 1880s locates the onset of depression. But the distribution of output in the late 1860s and 1870s indicates that the realignment from the grain to livestock economy was already well in motion.

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