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**THE OWNERSHIP OF FARMS AND FARMLANDS
IN THURLESTONE AND THE SOUTH HAMS
IN RECENT TIMES.**

With many thanks & best wishes
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(This article is a result of, and inspired by the lecture given to the 22nd Annual General Meeting of the Devon History Society, by Professor Charles Phythian-Adams, a resume of which was published in *The Devon Historian* 47 qOctober 1993).

During the past two hundred years, the farmers of Thurlestone have continued their traditional task of providing an abundance of cattle, sheep and crops. Most of them have either been born in the parish or have had close family connections with it. This article seeks to investigate the trends in ownership during a period of profound change in farming methods and to compare them briefly with trends in neighbouring parishes in the South Hams.

THE FARMLANDS

In 1777 the Earl of Devon, who then owned most of the parish, ordered a detailed survey of his holdings.¹ This 'Courtenay Survey' described his estate of over 900 acres in the fertile southern part of the parish, which included the hamlets of Thurlestone, Buckland and Bantham. The pastureland was divided into 228 fields of an acre or more, each with its own name. These were grouped into forty-eight farms that were divided between seventeen tenant farmers who sublet small holdings and allotments. About one-half of the fields have survived unchanged, retaining their old names; the remainder have either disappeared as they have been absorbed into larger fields or can be identified in outline as ridges covered with grass and sometimes strengthened with local stone.

The Courtenay family retained the land until 1859 when it was sold to Samuel Brunskill, an Exeter tailor; it remained with the Brunskills, less 200 acres that were sold in 1918, until 1923 when it was acquired by Commander Evans, an industrialist and a regular visitor to the district.² The Evans Estates of Cardiff, having sold the coastal strip of 124 acres to the Thurlestone Golf Club in 1923, now own and let about one-half of the farmland to tenant farmers, the other half being the freehold property of their respective owners.

With three very different landlords in the past two hundred years, the parish has prospered in a modest way. The livestock and crops have found a ready market at nearby Kingsbridge, especially in times of war. Latterly, with better communications, improved farming methods and income from holiday makers and new residents, it has been able to sustain a good standard of living.

FAMILY CONNECTIONS 1777 to 1900

Of the seventeen tenant farmers in 1777, thirteen or 77 per cent, were baptised in the parish church, as were nine of their fathers and eight of their grand-fathers. Three years later, in 1780, twenty-three or 69 per cent of the thirty-four parishioners who contributed to the Land Tax³ had been baptised in the church. Thus, land tenancy was firmly in the hands of the native born, that is, born in the parish. With the publication of various directories in the nineteenth century, notably by White and Kelly, similar

comparisons between farmers and baptisms may be made.

Total baptisms in the Thurlestone parish registers during the period 1650 to 1900 show a consistency which suggests reliable registration, with a peak in the years 1750 to 1850 in accord with the national experience.⁴ Under-registration is bound to have occurred at times, maybe by as much as 15 per cent, but accurate assessment of the shortfall is impossible at Thurlestone,⁴ as it is elsewhere.⁵ White's Directories of Devon describing the years 1850, 1878, and 1880⁶ list on average twelve farmers of whom about 70 per cent had been baptised in the parish church; Kelly, in the years 1866 to 1893,⁷ noted an average of about 55 per cent. Thus the native born still maintained their hold on the tenure of land into the latter part of the nineteenth century. After 1900, baptisms progressively fell all over the country and are of very little value in comparative studies.

This sustained hold on tenancies up to 1900 may be explained in part by the structure of society in the rather isolated community of Thurlestone. From 1753, when marriages started to be registered on printed forms showing the occupations of bridegrooms, farmers accounted for about 12 per cent and husbandmen for another 53 per cent.⁸ Thus with about 65 per cent of the men working on the land, about 100 of the population of 350 and many from large families, continuity was ordinarily a matter of course.

THE PRESENT CENTURY

During this century, there has been a gradual reduction in the number of farms, as small unprofitable properties have been absorbed by or leased to larger farms. The eight that remain are scattered over the parish, all but one showing on the map of 1777 and some retaining relics of a distant past. Five have a water supply from their own springs and six have cess pits, the others having connections with the main water and sewage systems. They comprise the following.

COURT PARK. (Messrs. Rodney and Geoffrey Stidston) 230 acres with 200 South Devon cattle, 400 sheep and 75 acres of corn. The Stidston brothers' grandfather Albert, a native of Kingston near Modbury where he was brought up on his father's farm, bought the tenancy of the farm in 1887 and the freehold in 1918. The estate passed to his son Eric in 1938 and to Eric's sons Rodney and Geoffrey in 1971 and will probably pass to one of their sons in due course.

WHITLEY (Mr. and Mrs. Wilfred Palmer). 165 acres with 200 South Devons and a milking herd, 250 sheep and 75 acres of crops. Mrs. Palmer's father, Mr. Pearse of Stokenham nearby, acquired the tenancy of the farm in 1933 and bought the freehold in 1948. He gave it to his daughter Helen in the year of her marriage in 1966 to Wilfred Palmer who was born and bred on a farm in Blackawton. Their son now works full-time on the farm.

HOMEFIELD (Mr. Gordon Bromfield) 132 acres with 140 Friesians and no corn since the barns were destroyed by fire in 1979. Gordon's great-uncle Mr. Jack Broad, Cornish born but raised in the hamlet of Buckland, secured the tenancy of the farm from Mr. Stidston in 1919 and handed over its unprofitable 69 acres to Gordon in 1969, together with the village shop which Frances his wife successfully manages. Gordon came from Tiverton and, after qualifying at Bicton, worked for a time at Flete. He hopes his son will follow him.

AUNEMOUTH (Mr. John Dayment) 203 acres with 80 beef and 60 dairy cattle, 40 acres of crops. John's father brought his family down from Bridford near Exeter in 1946 and rented the farm; he passed it on to John in 1970, one of whose sons will probably follow him.

BUCKLAND (Mr. Vic Adams). 150 acres with 55 dairy cattle and up to 25 acres of corn. Vic's father came from nearby Hope Cove and took over the tenancy in 1959, passing it on to him in 1986; his son may follow him.

CROSS PARK (Mrs. W.J. Sharley) 56 acres. 5 cattle only. Mr. & Mrs. Sharley came down from Somerset and bought the freehold in 1958; they farmed 80 cattle with 50 sheep and 10 acres of crops until Mr. Sharley's death. The pastureland is now let. Mrs. Sharley lives in the farmhouse and hopes that one of her children or grandchildren will revive the farm eventually.

HIGHER AUNEMOUTH (Mr. P.O. Williams) 50 acres with formerly 50 Friesians and 30 pigs but, with indifferent health, he sold them and lets the pasturage retaining the house. Mr. Williams comes from Plymouth and bought the freehold in 1964, having been selected from several applicants because of his interest in the wild life and game birds on the estate. His son, a professional photographer, intends to live there in due course.

NORTH UPTON (Mr. Tom Gunning) 90 acres, formerly up to 120 cattle, 40 pigs and 5,000 chickens. Coming from Bristol, Tom's father bought the freehold in 1964 from a religious sect which left some caravans on the site. He handed it over in 1972 to Tom who hopes his son will follow him. Tom found farming on the comparatively poor soil to be unprofitable and so he has now leased it for grazing. He has converted the farm buildings into private residences and has a stand for 30 privately owned caravans which he services.

These brief notes summarise the family connections of the owners of the eight farms in the parish. Of the present owners, only the Stidston brothers were baptised in the parish church, but they and two others were native born. Significantly, all of them either have a son working with them or one they hope will inherit the property in due course. Three can claim ownership by their families since before World War II, namely at Court Park (1887), Homefield (1919) and Whitley (1933); all three were acquired by young South Hams farmers. The remainder changed hands after the war, their new owners coming from nearby Hope Cove, Plymouth, Exeter, Somerset and Bristol.

No farm has been sold since 1964, mainly due to changes in farming methods. Until 40 years ago, half-a-dozen or more husbandmen would be employed on farms of over 100 acres, most of them living in cottages that were part of the farm. Now, thanks to modern methods and machinery, two or three men manage the larger farms, sometimes with the wife of the owner helping with the paper work. With the high cost of hiring labour, the only way to ensure a profit is to limit the wages bill, increase the livestock and rent or buy more pastureland. This has been done on the larger farms and has included the acquisition of the grazing rights on the three farms that are no longer farmed by their owners and which might otherwise have been sold.

DISCUSSION

The scope for assessing tenure and inheritance is necessarily limited if it is ~~not~~ confined to the eight farms in the parish of Thurlestone. Hence, for comparison, the opinions of two much respected farmers in nearby parishes have been sought, namely Mr. John Rossiter and Mr. Richard Rogers;⁹ between them, they have an intimate knowledge of farming in the district covering the dozen parishes from Thurlestone to Kingsbridge and Charleton and down to Salcombe. They both stressed the similarities in tenure throughout the district, except for the Evans Estates in Thurlestone; they knew of no other large holding that embraced more than one farm.

The farms in the district ordinarily extend to 100 to 150 acres with much the same

livestock and crops as Thurlestone; the owner is often assisted by his son or a close relative and hires self-employed farmworkers as necessary. The need to enlarge estates to maintain viability has meant the disappearance of smallholdings; in South Milton, the number of farms has fallen from fourteen to six since 1950. Allotments, which were so popular up to 1950, have gone as their owners have found more enjoyable ways of spending their evenings and leisure time.

Almost all farms in the district are now freehold properties. When an owner contemplates retirement and has no successor, he ordinarily has no difficulty in letting or selling his fields to a farmer nearby; he may then retain his house or convert it into a retirement or holiday home. Very few farms have reached the open market since 1970.

About one-half of the existing farm owners in the district are native born and, having relations and friends in the community in which they have spent their lives, are proud of their heritage. In this respect South Milton has much in common with Thurlestone, which it adjoins. Three of their six present owners were born in the village and another at nearby Stokenham; they are all the sons or daughters of Westcountry farmers and hope their children will follow them. The same general pattern prevails throughout the district.

For the future, the mode of life and the opinions of the farmers are relevant. They all work long hours and are aware of the importance of maintaining their health. They have little time for hobbies but gain much information as well as pleasure from regular attendance at local markets. All are to some extent concerned about the steadily rising cost of the routine maintenance of their farms and of the restrictions that may come from the European Economic Community. Yet farming is their life and they intend to continue with it, come what may.

I wish to thank the farmers for the information and assistance which they have given me and the Thurlestone Parish Council for its support.

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