

DERBYSHIRE CLERGY ON THE SPOT: THE 1801 CROP RETURNS

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The year 1801 saw the first census of population when, in March, incumbent clergy or alternatively the overseers of the poor or schoolmasters, were tasked with recording the number of males and females in each parish or township as well as those engaged in trade, agriculture or manufacturing. In September of the same year the government devolved to the diocesan bishops the further task of obtaining from parish clergy a record of the acreages of crops within their parish grown and harvested in the current season. Printed forms were provided listing eight crops: wheat, barley, oats, potatoes, peas, beans, turnips and rye, but no information was sought about temporary or permanent grassland. The resultant crop statistics plus accompanying written comment of many clergy are known as the 1801 Crop Returns.¹

The Crop Returns arose from the government's need to be better informed about the extent of cultivated land in Britain and hence the likely amounts of home-grown bread grains available to feed the nation.² In the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the rate of population increase in England and Wales was unprecedented, leading to growth from an estimated 7 million in 1780 to 8.6 million in 1801, and for Derbyshire from approximately 160,000 to 200,000. Although this period was marked by agricultural improvement, it appears that the farming sector struggled to keep up with the increase in demand, its efforts being further hampered by adverse weather resulting in poor harvests, notably in 1799. In addition, the established continental trade in farm products was disrupted by the French Wars, the prospect of a French invasion and the consequent increased size of the armed forces, leading to government involvement in the food market. Various factors resulted in a steady increase in the price of grains and livestock products from the 1780s which, although to the benefit of farmers, were particularly reflected in the price of bread, resulting in turn in discontent among the populace. The latter factor was no doubt significant in the government's wish to be better informed about potential food supplies.

The 1801 returns were not the first attempt to survey the extent of cropland. In 1793 a parish-by-parish census of crops and grass had been proposed by the newly established Board of Agriculture. Such a survey was initiated in 1795 by the Duke of Portland, whereby petty constables were to enquire from farmers as to the acreages of wheat, barley, oats, rye, beans and peas grown in that year, plus an evaluation of yields compared with 1794. Few results of this survey survive but in Derbyshire those for Scarsdale hundred have been analysed by Dudley Fowkes.³ In 1800 bishops were requested to seek a comparison of the 1800 harvest with that of 1799 and in 1801 to ask clergy to make returns of cropland on a parish basis. Although somewhat better constructed than previous surveys, that of 1801 was not successful, as for all counties the number of returns made by clergy was far from complete. For Derbyshire forms were returned from 77 parishes or chapeltries, which covered just 35 per cent of the county area (Fig. 1). Similarly poor responses occurred in Staffordshire and Leicestershire, while in Nottinghamshire fewer than ten returns were made.⁴

The poor response reflected the difficult position in which clergy found themselves. Unlike

the census of population, this survey lacked statutory obligation and effectively came down to the ability of the clergy to obtain the required information from individual farmers. In some parishes farmers numbered over a hundred and it is clear that many were unwilling to cooperate. The incumbents at Quarndon and Normanton by Derby both wrote that 'farmers very unwilling to make the return',⁵ while at Etwall 'many of the parishioners refused to make a statement after every strenuous effort on my part'. The parishes of Alvaston and Boulton were still farmed in open fields and 'so intermixed that is impossible to distinguish what number of acres lies in each parish'. At Mellor farmers had 'taken up a foolish suspicion that Government has it in contemplation to tax corn land'. Similar concerns as to financial implications would relate to farmers' tithe obligations to the very man asking for precise crop information. A further limitation took the form of understatement, as indicated by the vicar's report for Brailsford, where the return was 'less than the real quantity grown'.

W.G. Hoskins remarked that there is no evidence that the 1801 Crop Returns were ever used by government and they have taken their place as a data source for local and agricultural historians.⁶ As such they are difficult to use as seemingly precise information needs constant qualification on grounds of accuracy and completeness. Even so, previous work using the returns has identified important aspects of the distribution and relative importance of crops. This has been the case for Leicestershire⁷ and Staffordshire⁸ and, to a lesser extent, Derbyshire.⁹ Derbyshire, as a predominantly pastoral county in the late eighteenth century, was reported by Thomas Brown to be only one-fifth in cropland,¹⁰ although some twenty years later John Farey considered the proportion to be somewhat greater.¹¹ Both Brown and Farey based their accounts of agriculture in Derbyshire on recognition of a correlation between farming and geology as a surrogate for soil type, an approach followed subsequently¹² and adopted here. Inevitably the distribution of the Derbyshire returns is distinctly uneven in relation to the county's geology. The Dark Peak and much of south Derbyshire are poorly represented and many parishes straddle geological boundaries or feature overlying boulder clay or gravels, so that it is necessary to identify in the returns parishes of similar geology. Bearing in mind probable understatement it is also desirable to identify the proportion of cultivated land within parishes, and so parish areas need to be identified from acreages as stated in the nineteenth-century censuses.¹³ In so doing the proportion of parish area not cropped is also determined, i.e. the land occupied by settlement, woodland and various types of grassland, which for Derbyshire would have been the most extensive use of land.

So, given their difficulties, how do those clergy who made a return help us in understanding the Derbyshire rural scene of over two hundred years ago? The written comment from clergy suggests that the harvest of 1801 had been above average, as 23 incumbents out of 62 used terms like 'good and productive crops' and occasionally 'remarkably good' and even 'abundant'. Aggregation of the crop acreages enables a ranking of crops grown in the county. Oats was most extensively grown, followed in order by wheat, barley, turnips, peas and beans and potatoes. Only small acreages of potatoes were recorded and rye was rarely grown. In addition important, if not unexpected, variations can be identified between the uplands of the Peak and lowland Derbyshire and also within the lowlands.

The uplands of the Peak are mostly represented by White Peak parishes. Here in the early nineteenth century the more elevated tracts, then characterised by mossy limestone heath,¹⁴ were still to be enclosed, while more southerly enclosed parishes show but limited cropped land. These are illustrated in Table 1 where the small percentages of cropland are dominated by oats. The vicar of Tissington remarked that 'little or no grain is raised in this parish for



Fig. 1: Parishes referred to in Tables 1 to 5.

sale', the 'principal uses of the lands being for dairy and sheep'. For Bradbourne the vicar wrote that 'it's general good grassland that a considerable quantity of cheese is made in the parish and young stock reared', while 'potatoes are planted by the farmers for their own use and seldom more than they use'. Oats were grown for human consumption, oatcakes or flat-breads being the 'common bread' of this part of Derbyshire, which Farey states were made on many farms.¹⁵ Clearly the proportion of land in grass was high and the turnips would have been supplementary feed notably for sheep. Farey indicates that following enclosure turnips were grown in the limestone Peak, as at Brassington, where ash and lime were mixed to provide a suitable soil.¹⁶

On the gritstone and shales of the Dark Peak returns for Glossop and Mellor cover an extensive tract of what the vicar described as 'mountainous country'. The chapelry of Mellor extended six miles by four but was 'in part populous as it abounds in cotton manufacture'. He also stated that the land was in the occupation of 114 small farmers who grew corn, i.e. oats, for the consumption of their families. However, on the eastern flanks of the Peak, along the line of the Derwent Valley, the opportunities for farming were more varied. The incumbent of the 6,000-acre Matlock parish noted only 'a very small proportion in cultivation' (calculated at 9 per cent and predominantly oats): the 'general situation so hilly and at the same time so full of stones (sic) added to a very shallow soil'. Cromford (calculated at 4 per cent cropland) was described as moorland and of 'no use', though many cows were kept for 'the accommodation of the people employed in spinning cotton'. By contrast, in the less hilly area round Crich at least 26 per cent was cropped, with oats at 572 acres and wheat at 468 acres.

Excepting the wide floodplain of the Trent, parishes of the differing geologies of lowland Derbyshire all featured a significant percentage of cropland, though rarely more than a third of their area. In the north-east the Magnesian Limestone outcrop had the highest proportion in crops in Derbyshire. Table 2 shows that here wheat and oats were approximately of equal importance, followed by barley. Unsurprisingly, the relative proportions match closely those calculated by Fowkes for the 1795 survey. Fowkes further noted that yields were relatively low on the limestone which may well reflect comment from the incumbents of Clowne, Elmtun and Whitwell that their parishes featured 'bad limestone land', despite which it produced excellent or good crops of all kinds. The substantial acreages of turnips indicate the adoption of rotations to provide feed mainly for sheep. Turnips would have been well-suited to soils with a high lime content.

The extensive Coal Measure country has varied geology, with a predominance of shales giving heavy land. The indicated pattern of cultivation was similar to the Magnesian Limestone but with less emphasis on turnips. Clergy of coalfield parishes offered no comment, except at Brampton where the difficulty of carrying out the survey was described at length and where 3,500 acres of enclosures 'produced large quantities of grain'.

Similarly the marl country parishes of south Derbyshire displayed less cultivated land than those of the Magnesian Limestone. Here the main emphasis was on dairying supported by grass. At Breaston crops were reported as 'abundant and well gotten' and 'the grazing and dairy farms which occupy the greater part of the lands in this parish have succeeded very well indeed'. At Risley 'the produce of grain of every kind is far above average. The grazing and dairy farms have succeeded beyond former years'. At Radbourne the wheat crops were 'generally good'.

Parishes along the Trent and its tributaries had extensive floodplain meadows, reflected in the low percentage of tillage for Great Wilne. At Stanton by Bridge the vicar considered that,

meadows and woodland apart, less than 'a fourth of the remainder appears to be in tillage', remarking that this was 'a larger proportion than has usually obtained previous to the late very high prices of grain'. This was the only suggestion in the returns that high prices had moved farmers to sow more grain. Cabbage was grown for beasts, though it was often considered to taint the taste of milk. On the north bank of the Trent at Swarkestone one third of land away from the floodplain was in a state of tillage. Around Derby farmland served the needs of town, and so at Little Chester there were meadows or grazing land, while in St Peter's parish 'at the skirts of the town the land is mostly in grass where it is occupied by large gardeners who supply the town with vegetables'. In St Werbergh there was 'no arable ground all the lands being pasture'.

W.E. Minchinton wrote that 'the 1801 returns provide both statistical information and a commentary on rural life as viewed through the eyes of local parsons'.¹⁷ Certainly the independence of the farming community comes through strongly in their reluctance to take part in the survey. Otherwise from the perspective of the local historian it is a case of careful evaluation of incomplete data. The returns collected in 1801 do provide evidence of the character of farming and its relationship with the varied landscapes of Derbyshire. The Derbyshire returns support the estimates of Brown and Farey that something of the order of one-fifth of the land was cropped. Oats was the most important crop, not just to feed horses but at that time for oat bread. Wheat as the second ranking crop was grown widely in lowland Derbyshire. As a light land crop barley was only ranked first in parishes characterised by sandstone or gravels. Turnips are also a light land crop but their occurrence in many returns indicates the adoption of progressive farming. This is described in some detail by Farey who identified variants of the Norfolk four-course rotation, whereby winter feed to support livestock, notably sheep, could be grown.¹⁸ However, only a few clergy noted that the essence of Derbyshire farming was pastoralism, especially in the uplands, and this may reflect the nature of the enquiry to which they were asked to respond. Elsewhere, in the context of more mixed patterns of farming, a specialism in dairying and farmhouse cheese-making was evolving in the southern margins of the Peak and the marl country, alongside stock raising and sheep rearing.

Table 1: White Peak Parishes in 1801

<i>Parish</i>	<i>Land in tillage (%)</i>	<i>Wheat (acres)</i>	<i>Barley (acres)</i>	<i>Oats (acres)</i>	<i>Potatoes (acres)</i>	<i>Peas and beans (acres)</i>	<i>Turnips (acres)</i>
Ballidon	7	0	3	92	4	0	32
Bonsall	7	6	0	145	0	0	3
Bradbourne	12	26	3	145	0	1	3
Hartington	3	0	0	337	9	0	177
Parwich	9	13	3	254	12	0	25
Tissington	6	15	0	102	5	0	10

Table 2: Magnesian Limestone Parishes in 1801

<i>Parish</i>	<i>Land in tillage (%)</i>	<i>Wheat (acres)</i>	<i>Barley (acres)</i>	<i>Oats (acres)</i>	<i>Potatoes (acres)</i>	<i>Peas and beans (acres)</i>	<i>Turnips (acres)</i>
Clowne	28	239	84	192	24	120	210
Elmton	29	243	205	262	8	63	50
Langwith	36	180	99	151	3	42	61
Scarcliffe	34	453	203	467	4	63	155
Whitwell	27	584	250	494	12	90	100

Table 3: Coal Measures Parishes in 1801

<i>Parish</i>	<i>Land in tillage (%)</i>	<i>Wheat (acres)</i>	<i>Barley (acres)</i>	<i>Oats (acres)</i>	<i>Potatoes (acres)</i>	<i>Peas and beans (acres)</i>	<i>Turnips (acres)</i>
Blackwell	26	352	183	47	0	0-	26
North Wingfield	29	712	132	957	35	43	97
Pinxton	25	137	15	126	12	6	10
South Normanton	33	148	24	416	7	14	26
South Wingfield	24	308	99	348	13	0	34

Table 4: Red Marl Parishes in 1801

<i>Parish</i>	<i>Land in tillage (%)</i>	<i>Wheat (acres)</i>	<i>Barley (acres)</i>	<i>Oats (acres)</i>	<i>Potatoes (acres)</i>	<i>Peas and beans (acres)</i>	<i>Turnips (acres)</i>
Brailsford	19	236	146	335	6	22	90
Breaston	18	96	71	63	2	21	11
Chaddesden	22	146	43	144	7	0	5
Radbourne	14	126	17	104	4	60	4
Risley	28	122	75	73	9	22	20

Table 5: Trentside Parishes in 1801

<i>Parish</i>	<i>Land in tillage (%)</i>	<i>Wheat (acres)</i>	<i>Barley (acres)</i>	<i>Oats (acres)</i>	<i>Potatoes (acres)</i>	<i>Peas and beans (acres)</i>	<i>Turnips (acres)</i>
Great Wilne	6	64	68	51	5	15	10
Stanton by Bridge	10	45	83	45	0	4	0
Swarkestone	20	75	80	47	4	29	0
Weston on Trent	21	150	180	80	4	40	50

REFERENCES

(Endnotes)

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- ⁵ All quotations are from the comments from the clergy included with the crop returns.
- ⁶ Hoskins, 'Leicestershire', 142.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 140–2.
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- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 136.
- ¹⁷ Minchinton, 'Agricultural returns', 43.
- ¹⁸ Farey, *General View*, II, 102–131.