Farming in Devon in the 1920s

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Devon is universally recognised as an 'agricultural' county, and the way in which farming changed – or did not change – in the 1920s is a key part of the county's history. Some aspects of farming, such as initiatives to regenerate rural life and improve rural housing, the implications of the introduction of motor transport, and the establishment of the new agricultural college at Seale-Hayne, are dealt with in other essays in the Devon in the 1920s collection. This essay concentrates on the nature of farming and the use of agricultural land in the county rather than on other aspects such as farmers' incomes, initiatives for food processing or the establishment of co-operative methods.

A substantial amount of work, described below, has gone into the creation of a database from the parish returns for 1920, 1922, 1925 and 1929, submitted to the Ministry of Agriculture during the 1920s. For such a large county this has been a major exercise and it is not yet complete, as data for a number of areas remain to be transcribed. The discussion below should be regarded as a set of initial observations and preliminary conclusions that can be further developed over time.

This essay takes an overview of farming in the county and the after-effects of action taken during the First World War. It sets out the parameters for the study and then discusses at national, county and sub-county level the issues of landholding, farming of crops and grass, livestock farming and labour. It concludes that farmers were generally knowledgeable about what types of farming worked best on their farm. Within that general framework, however, they responded to incentives and disincentives in the 1920s by modifying their farming practice.

Farming in Devon before the end of the First World War

When J. R. Currie of Dartington Hall and W. H. Long of the Seale-Hayne Agricultural College came to write the introduction to their *Agricultural Survey in South Devon* at the end of the 1920s, they took an overview of the agriculture of Devon by comparison with that of England and Wales

as a whole.[1] They described it as differing from the national picture by having a greater proportion of 'mountain and heathland' (on Dartmoor and Exmoor), a smaller proportion of land under corn crops, and being more heavily stocked with cattle and sheep. The proportion of both very small and very large farms was smaller than for England and Wales overall.

Farming was still the dominant occupation in the county in the 1920s. The report on the 1921 census confirms this, stating that the overall rate per 1,000 employed workers in the county was 166/1,000, and in rural district council (RDC) areas it was 431/1000, rising to levels above 500/1,000 in South Molton, Honiton, Crediton, Holsworthy and Broadwoodwidger RDCs. The ratios of labourers per 100 farmers were also calculated. This showed a range from 90/100 farmers in Holsworthy, followed by 104/100 in Culmstock and 102/100 in Tavistock, and increasing to 200/100 farmers and over in Kingsbridge, St Thomas and Plympton St Mary. The commentator suggests that the ratios are low on small, upland grazing farms and high 'where farms are large' and 'tillage prevails'.[2]

Farming in Devon, as in the rest of the country, had been increasingly affected by the growing level of food imports, which had led to significant depression at the end of the nineteenth century, land sales and a move of the population away from the countryside to the towns. The First World War reduced the level of imports, and the combination of a poor harvest in 1916 and the loss of shipping as a result of enemy action led the government to take greater control of food production. By the end of the war, local agricultural executive committees in each county were taking action to control cropping and stocking, and farmers were being incentivised to maximise the production of wheat and oats by the guarantee, under the Corn Production Act 1917, of minimum prices for wheat and oats for six years. The focus on farming and the difficulties of finding labour lent added significance to the role of the county farmers' unions, such as the Devon Farmers' Union, and unions representing land workers, such as the National Union of Agricultural Workers.

The nineteenth century had also seen change in other areas affecting farming. Improvements in scientific understanding led to greater productivity through better methods of soil cultivation and stock-breeding. Landowners and leading farmers had interested themselves in agricultural improvement, leading to the formation of county agricultural associations and the institution of county shows. The role of the state had also increased, particularly in the area of public health and

[1] J. R. Currie and W. S. Long, *An Agricultural Survey in South Devon* (Seale-Hayne College and Dartington Hall, 1929), pp. 8–11.
[2] *Census of England and Wales, 1921: County of Devon* (HMSO, 1923).

the powers of local government bodies. Work on the transmission of disease, especially in relation to the high levels of mortality from tuberculosis, which included that transmitted from cattle through diseased meat and infected milk, led to stricter regulations about the conditions in which animals were kept. It also prompted the establishment of initiatives led by county councils in the area of agricultural education.

The context for farming in the 1920s

As the war ended, the government began to focus on the 'reconstruction' of areas of national life affected by the war. They created a Ministry of Reconstruction, which had as part of its remit the question of how rural life could be regenerated and produced a series of initiatives for better housing, better education and better community facilities in rural areas. The Ministry of Health resumed its focus on eradicating tuberculosis. Deaths from tuberculosis had fallen in the early 1910s but had risen again during the war. Farming itself, however, was left to the Board of Agriculture, and a Royal Commission was established in 1919 to develop a post-war policy for agriculture, with cereal supply a priority. This led to the Agriculture Act 1920, which provided for minimum wheat and oat prices to come into effect from 1921. The Ministry of Health, with strong support from Waldorf Astor, Plymouth Sutton MP and later Viscount Astor, were also re-engaged in investigating the public health aspects of tuberculosis and would take a series of initiatives designed to eradicate the transmission of tuberculosis via cattle.

Almost immediately, however, an increase in food imports, particularly from North America, and a general recession led to a fall in prices. Whilst consumers benefitted from lower prices, the fall would have required the government to pay out up to £30m in subsidies to farmers. This would have been difficult to justify when so many other areas of industry and public service were also seeking government support. As part of the overall plan to make substantial reductions in public expenditure, the government passed the Corn Production (Repeal) Act in 1921, abolishing the guaranteed wheat and oat prices before they had even been implemented and without the four-year notice that had been promised for the adjustment of crop rotations. An alternative compensation arrangement was made: a one-off £3 per acre for wheat and £4 per acre for oats for all land under those crops in June 1921. The arrangements for setting wages in the agricultural sector nationally were dismantled, being replaced instead by local negotiating structures. In addition, £1 million was promised for the promotion of agricultural education and research.

The legislation had been strongly opposed in the House of Commons, although there was a general recognition that some action needed to be taken. F. D. Acland of Killerton, at the time the MP for Camborne, pointed out in the debate that the repeal of the pledge would inevitably destroy trust and co-operation between the government and the landowning and farming community.[3] It was indeed blamed by many farmers for their subsequent financial difficulties. It thus became known as the 'Great Betrayal', though in fact not all farmers regarded it as a betrayal; some regarded any reduction in government 'interference' as a positive gain. The loss of the subsidy had a particularly harsh impact on those farming in the predominantly arable areas of eastern England, whilst Devon – where there was a greater proportion of livestock farming – was to some extent protected.

Debate continued throughout the 1920s on whether taxes should be levied on imported food, to protect farmers, or whether free trade should prevail. No taxes were introduced on imported food. In fact, Prime Minister Baldwin's attempt to abolish free trade cost him the election that he called at the end of 1923. Farmers continued to press for, and sometimes to gain, concessions from the government, for example in relation to the de-rating of farmland where they achieved significant change.[4] However, as the 1920s drew to a close, George Lambert, the MP for South Molton, himself a farmer, was still asking in the House of Commons why if protectionism was good for the silk industry it was not good for agriculture?[5]

The market for liquid milk in the southern half of England was no longer subject to price control but was affected by the dominance of two companies in particular: United Dairies and Express Dairies. This pattern of growing dominance of a few firms amongst purchasers, disadvantaging small-scale producers in bargaining power, was seen also in grain milling and baking, animal food manufacture and meat wholesaling. Public health regulation continued to tighten, however. In 1922 a system of licensing types of milk for sale was introduced under the Milk and Dairies (Amendment) Act, with grades of milk designated as certified, Grade A (Tuberculin Tested) and Grade A. Then in 1926 came the Milk and Dairies Order 1926 which implemented the arrangement, originally legislated for in 1915, that made local authorities responsible for the inspection of cattle and cowsheds, requiring farmers to keep their utensils and their personnel clean. Farmers complained about the

[3] Quoted in Edith H. Whetham, 'The Agriculture Act, 1920 and Its Repeal – the "Great Betrayal", 1974', in *Agricultural History Review,* Vol. 22(1), pp. 36–49, p. 48.
[4] De-rating of agricultural land was effected in two stages by the Agricultural Rates Acts 1923 and 1929.
[5] *Western Times*, 12 July 1929.

increased bureaucracy and little extra financial reward for those whose milk was awarded top grading.[6]

By the late 1920s there was relative stability in farming, albeit at a low level of production; cheap cereals encouraged intensive livestock production and uneconomic arable fields were put down to grass or abandoned. Although the Repeal Fund had stimulated research introducing many new concepts, unless they obviously reduced costs or involved minimal expenditure, they were unlikely to be adopted.[7].

The present study

A study of farming in Devon was undertaken for the Devon in the 1920s project based principally on the use and interpretation of statistics gathered on a national basis by the Ministry of Agriculture.

Agricultural Statistics for England and Wales[8]

Responsibility for the development of farming lay with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, which had succeeded the Board of Agriculture in 1919. In order to assist them in their role they collected – via a network of 'crop reporters', paid a fee for their work – details at parish level of crops and livestock each year on all holdings over one acre on 4 June. Poultry statistics were not collected annually until 1926, although they were recorded in 1921 and 1924. Aggregated county and national data are in annual Agricultural Statistics reports published by the government's official printer, His Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO). The statistical tables are preceded by a report highlighting changes and giving comparisons over periods of up to forty years.

The original parish level records are held at the National Archive (TNA) under the catalogue heading Ministry of Agriculture (MAF) 68.[9] This series was augmented by a national enquiry into the agricultural output of England and Wales in 1925. Farmers had become accustomed to the collection of the data towards the end of the First World War when what had hitherto been undertaken on a voluntary basis for the Board of Agriculture had been made compulsory by the

[6] Linda Bryder, *Below the Magic Mountain: A social history of Tuberculosis in twentieth-century Britain,* (Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 133–35.
[7] Edith Whetham and Joan Thirsk, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales: Vol. 8, 1914–1939* (Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 199.
[8] *The National Archives*, 'Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and Predecessors: Statistics Divisions: Parish Summaries of Agricultural Returns', https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C10469. Accessed 18 Aug 2024.
[9] 1920 MAF 68/2967; 1921 MAF 68/3021; 1922 MAF 68/3075; 1923 MAF 68/3129; 1924 MAF 68/3183; 1925 MAF 68/3237; 1926 MAF 68/3291; 1927 MAF 68/3345; 1928 MAF 68/3399; 1929 MAF 68/3453; 1930 MAF 68/3507.

Corn Production Act of 1917. It had become voluntary again with the repeal of the Act in 1921, but was made permanently compulsory in 1925 under the Agricultural Returns Act.

The records for Devon were photographed for the Devon in the 1920s project and those for 1920, 1922, 1925 and 1929 transcribed and compiled into a database by a team comprising Graham Wooding, Abi Gray, Ted Hitchings, Penny Lawrence, James Morrison and Roger Wilkins.[10] The specific indicators did vary slightly from one year to the next and decisions about how to format these were agreed by the group. The database is available within the 1920s research collection under the title 'Farming in the 1920s Appendix'.

Farming areas in the study

The careful transfer of the transcriptions to spreadsheets enabled comparison of farming across Devon. However, with 454 parishes and nearly 100 columns of data it was not possible for a small team to transcribe all the county's records. Divisions were initially selected to follow those covered in an earlier study, *Food, Farming and Fishing in Devon During the First World War*,[11] with the addition of those for some other areas representative of different farming areas. To identify different types of farming, the group then used the areas identified by W. Harwood Long. He was the agricultural economist at Seale-Hayne College, near Newton Abbot, and wrote a paper about farming regions of Devon and Cornwall for the Royal Agricultural Society of England (RASE) Journal of 1933 using the 1928 MAF statistics.[12]

The generic mapping provided by Long proved challenging, and the statistics used are for those parishes that could be definitely allocated to an area. Long's areas are on the map below; the areas with transcribed data used in this paper are shown by the addition of a name as well as a number. Area 10 was separated for this study into three sub-areas for analysis: Crediton, Exeter and Kenton, the area south of Exeter on the west side of the Exe Estuary. It is surprising that Long combined all these parishes into a single area when, as shown in the discussion below, when disaggregated they demonstrate differing farming types, for example much higher levels of barley in the Kenton area.[13]

[10] The process of creating the database, which contains over 100,000 entries, involved more than 1,200 photographs taken at the National Archive. Photographs for areas not used in this study remain to be transcribed and entered.
[11] *Food, Farming and Fishing in Devon During the First World War* (Devon History Society, 2016), p. 62. www.devonhistorysociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Food-Farming-and-Fishing-in-Devon.pdf. Accessed 28 August 2024.
[12] Long, W. Harwood. 'Factors Affecting Some Types of Farming in Devon and Cornwall'. RASE Journal 94 (1933): 42–61.
[13] Long ensured that each of the areas he selected had a minimum of ten parishes. Nonetheless, even if Exeter and Kenton were taken together, it is hard to see why Crediton should not have been a separate area.

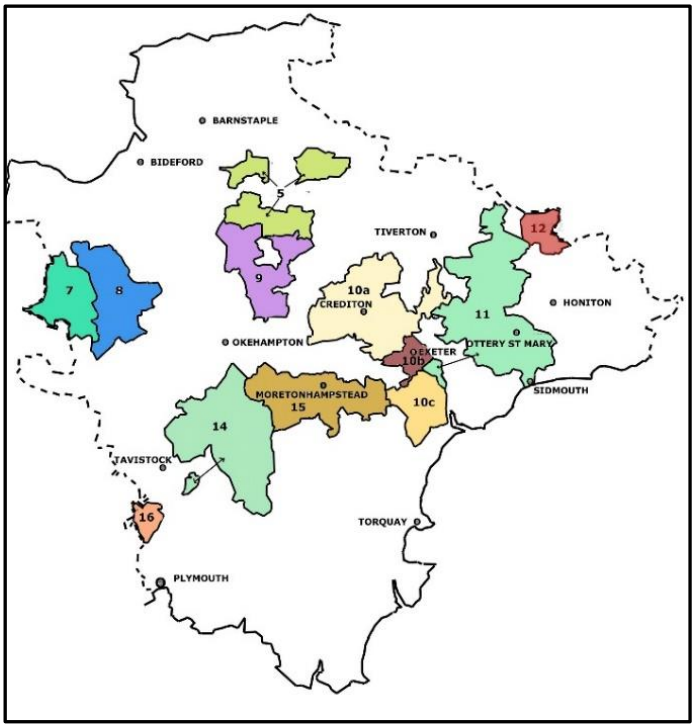

Figure 1: Map of the areas of the county used by Harwood Long with numbers and names (for those areas used in the study) added.[14]

The areas and the parishes within them are:

Area 5: Chulmleigh

Approx. 25,500 acres in six parishes:

1. Bishop's Nympton, 2. Burrington, 3. Cheldon, 4. Chittlehamholt, 5. Chittlehampton,
6. Chulmleigh

Area 7: Holsworthy

Approx. 20,300 acres in six parishes:

1. Clawton, 2. East Bridgerule, 3. Holsworthy, 4. Pancrasweek, 5. Pyworthy,
6. West Bridgerule

Area 8: Black Torrington

Approx. 25,300 acres in nine parishes:

1. Ashwater, 2. Black Torrington, 3. Bradford, 4. Cookbury, 5. Halwill, 6. Hollacombe,
7. Milton Damerel, 8. Sutcombe, 9. Thornbury

Area 9: Winkleigh

Approx. 24,500 acres in seven parishes:

[14] Long, p. 45.

1. Ashreigney, 2. Bondleigh, 3. Brushford, 4. Chawleigh, 5. Coldridge, 6. North Tawton, 7. Winklelgh

Area 10a: Crediton

Approx. 51,000 acres in fifteen parishes:

1. Brampford Speke, 2. Cheriton Fitzpaine, 3. Colebrook, 4. Crediton, 5. Kennerleigh, 6. Nether Exe, 7. Newton St Cyres, 8. Poughill, 9. Rewe (with Up Exe), 10. Sandford, 11. Shobrooke, 12. Silverton, 13. Upton Hellions, 14. Upton Pyne, 15. Whitestone

Area 10b: Exeter

Approx. 5,250 acres in six parishes:

1. Alphington, 2. Shillingford, 3. St David's, 4. St Leonard (Heavitree), 5. St Sidwell's, 6. St Thomas

Area 10c: Kenton

Approx. 14,800 acres in six parishes:

1. Ashcombe, 2. Exminster, 3. Kenn, 4. Kenton, 5. Mamhead, 6. Powderham

Area 11: Ottery St Mary

Approx. 67,000 acres in twenty-one parishes:

1. Aylesbeare, 2. Broadclyst, 3. Broadhembury, 4. Burlescombe, 5. Clyst Hydon, 6. Clyst St Lawrence, 7. Cullompton, 8. Harpford, 9. Kentisbeare, 10. Newton Poppleford, 11. Ottery St Mary, 12. Payhembury, 13. Plymtree, 14. Rockbeare, 15. Sidbury, 16. Sidmouth, 17. Talaton, 18. Topsham, 19. Uffculme, 20. Whimple, 21. Willand

Area 12: Blackdowns

Approx. 9,300 acres in two parishes:

1. Clayhidon, 2. Hemyock

Area 14: West Dartmoor

Approx. 9,800 acres in four parishes:

1. Lydford, 2. Mary Tavy, 3. Peter Tavy, 4. Sampford Spiney

Area 15: Moretonhampstead

Approx. 21,500 acres in ten parishes:

1. Ashton, 2. Bridford, 3. Chagford, 4. Christow, 5. Doddiscombsleigh, 6. Gidleigh, 7. Lustleigh, 8. Moretonhampstead, 9. North Bovey, 10. Throwleigh

In addition, one parish of approximately 5,000 acres in ***Area 16, Bere Ferrers***, was used.

Indicators selected for use in the study

For the purposes of this essay, an abbreviated range of indicators were selected from the range of data available. These were:

Crops and grass

Wheat; Barley; Oats; Other Corn; Total Corn; Potatoes; Root Fodder; Green Fodder; Sugar Beet; Vegetables; Small Fruit; Orchards; Hops, Flax and Other Crops; Croppage; Bare Fallow; Tillage; Temporary Grass; Arable Land; Permanent Grass; Crops and Grass' Sole Rough Grazing; Agricultural Land; Common Grazing.

Livestock

Total Horses; Agricultural Horses; Total Cattle; Dairy Herd; Sheep; Pigs; Fowls; Ducks; Geese; Turkeys; Total Poultry.

Labour

Total Regular Labour; Total Casual Labour; Total All Labour; Total Males; Total Females and Girls; Total Full-Time Male Equivalent.

The group selected four years for analysis: 1920, 1922, 1925 and 1929. The abbreviated database using the areas and indicators described above, for the years 1920, 1922, 1925 and 1929, is included as the Appendix to this paper.

Devon farming in a national context

Farmed area

The following charts show how the main categories within Devon's farming changed between 1919 and 1933, and how these changes compared with the situation for England and Wales. In all cases, except for poultry, the 1919 data forms the baseline, 1919 = 100. The selected dates extend beyond the 1920s, forming part of another study.[15]

The table gives the data for June 1919 and the proportions of each category; Devon's figures are similar to England & Wales with some variations.

Table 1: Baseline crops and grass data

MAF statistics 1919	**England & Wales**		**Devon**	
	acres		acres	

[15] Penny Lawrence, 'Agricultural Knowledge Transfer in Devon 1919–1939', Chapter 2, thesis in preparation for submission to the University of Exeter.

Total crops & grass	26,747,953		1,175,012	
Arable land	12,308,876	46.0%	542,688	46.2%
Wheat	2,221,195	8.3%	77,843	6.6%
Barley	1,509,716	5.6%	40,482	3.4%
Oats	2,564,326	9.6%	158,385	13.5%
Mixed corn	142,661	0.5%	15,766	1.3%
Total corn	*6,437,898*	*24.1%*	*292,476*	*24.9%*
Roots & green fodder	2,204,239	8.2%	89,890	7.7%
Potatoes	475,376	1.8%	13,504	1.1%
Other	282,489	1.1%	2,890	0.2%
Bare fallow	650,439	2.4%	7,850	0.7%
Rotation grass	2,258,435	8.4%	136,078	11.6%
Permanent grass	14,439,077	54.0%	632,324	53.8%
Mountain & heath for grazing	4,121,454		198,832	

The table shows that the total England & Wales crops and grass declined steadily and by 1933 was 94% of the 1919 figure. Permanent grass in 1921 was just above 1919, but by 1933 had increased by 10%. The changes for England and Wales and for Devon are represented schematically in the graphs below.

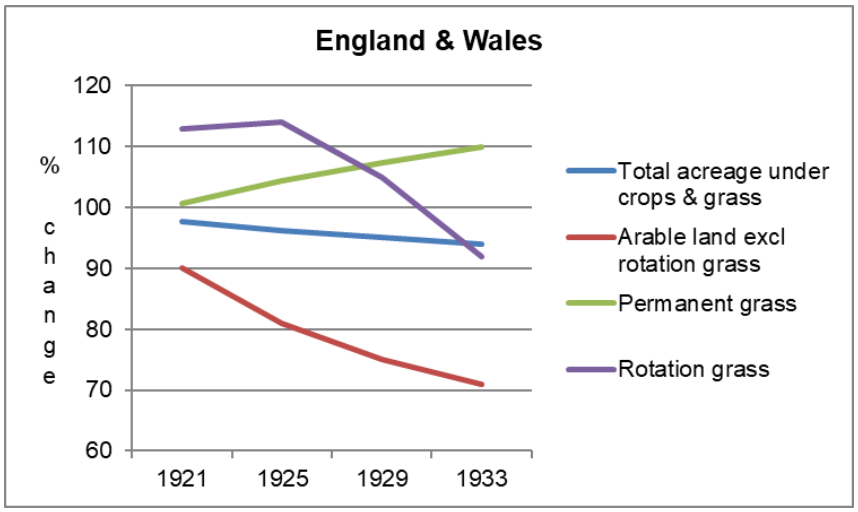

Figure 2: How the main categories within farming changed in England and Wales, 1919–33.

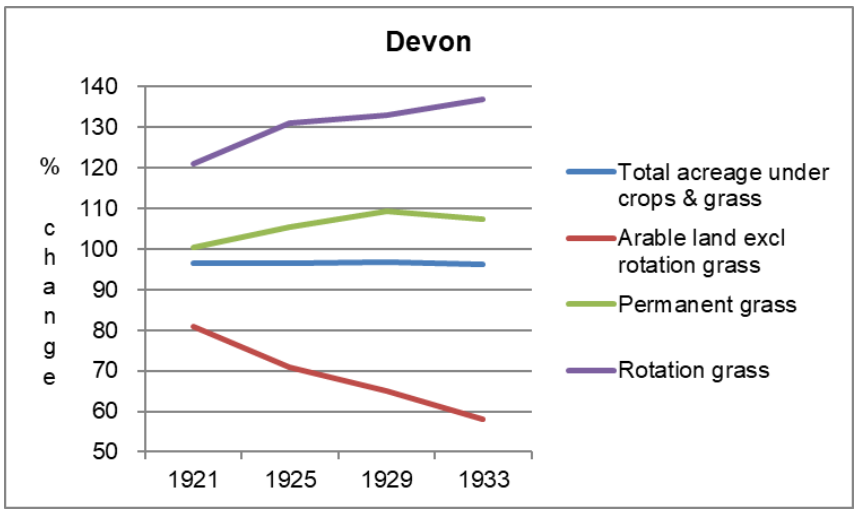

Figure 3: How the main categories within farming changed in Devon, 1919–33.

The arable area declined following the repeal of the 1920 Agriculture Act and the loss of the guaranteed prices set between 1917 and 1920. In Devon, land that had been marginal for cereals or that had been exhausted by their cultivation and ploughed up as a wartime initiative quickly reverted to grass. Permanent grass increased slightly but there was a marked increase in temporary grass in Devon compared to England and Wales. Excluding war years, there was a continuous decline of arable land from 1871.[16]

Crops (1919=100)

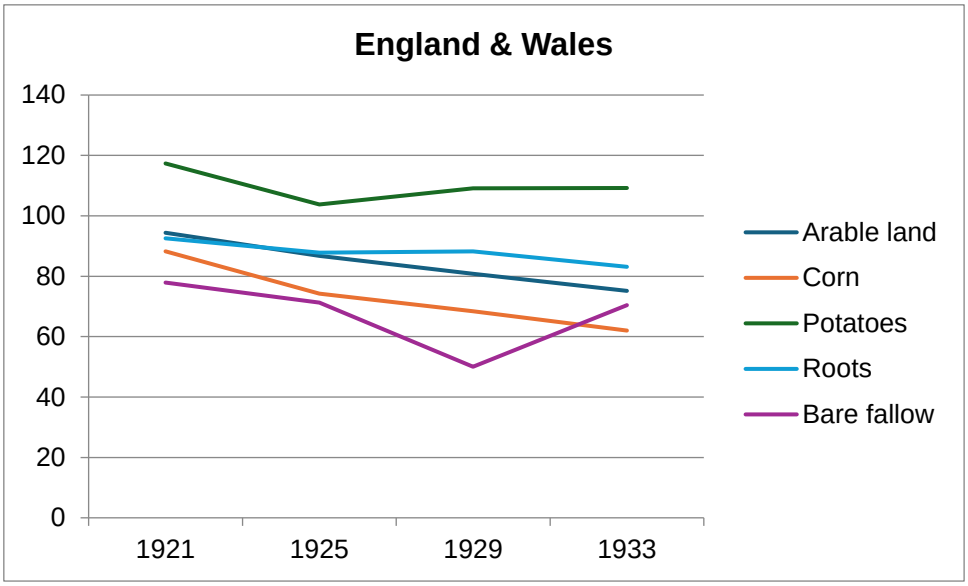

Figure 4: Crop production in England and Wales, 1919–33.

[16] 'Agricultural Statistics', 1934, p. 33.

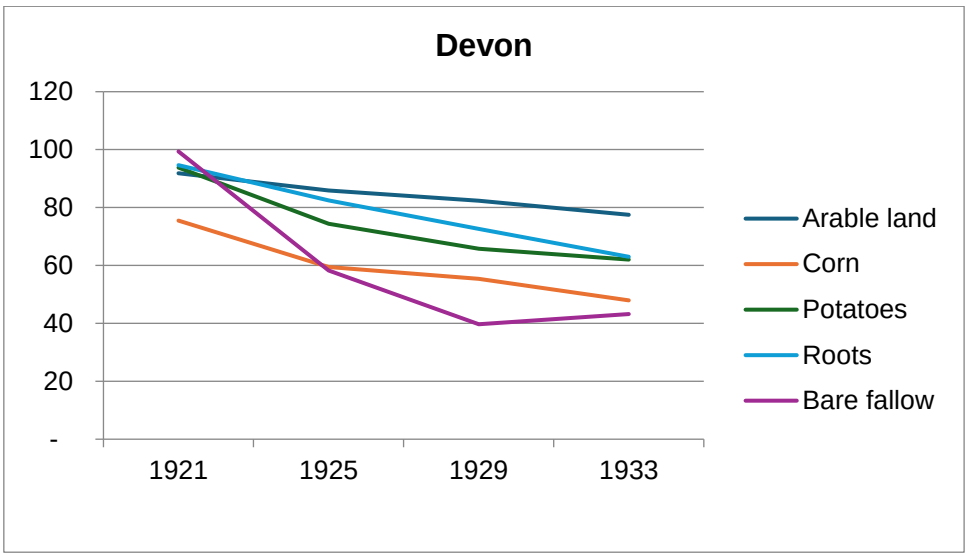

Figure 5: Crop production in Devon, 1919–33.

The reductions in corn and roots (swedes, turnips, mangolds, cabbages) were greater in Devon than for England and Wales, but start from a higher point (75 acres per 1,000 acres of crops and grass in 1919 compared to 57 acres) and ending at 51 acres and 49 acres respectively in 1933. There was a considerable difference in potato growing, which declined as opposed to a slight increase for England and Wales; the heavy soils of the Culm measures, for example, proving uneconomic in cultivation.

Sugar beet was first recorded in 1925 with 54,750 acres in England and Wales, rising to 364,068 acres by 1933. However, the absence of a factory nearer than Kidderminster meant it was uncommon in Devon, with a peak of 874 acres in 1930 and only 332 acres in 1933.

Cereals (1919=100)

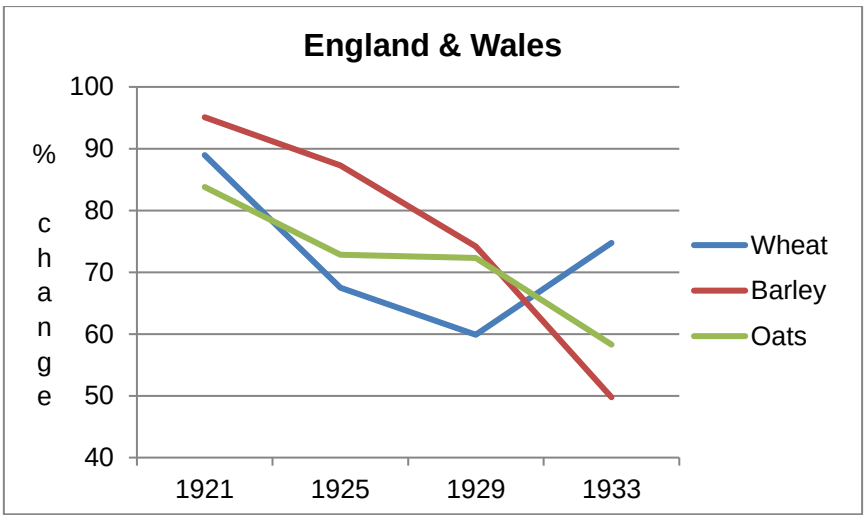

Figure 6: Cereals production in England and Wales, 1919–33.

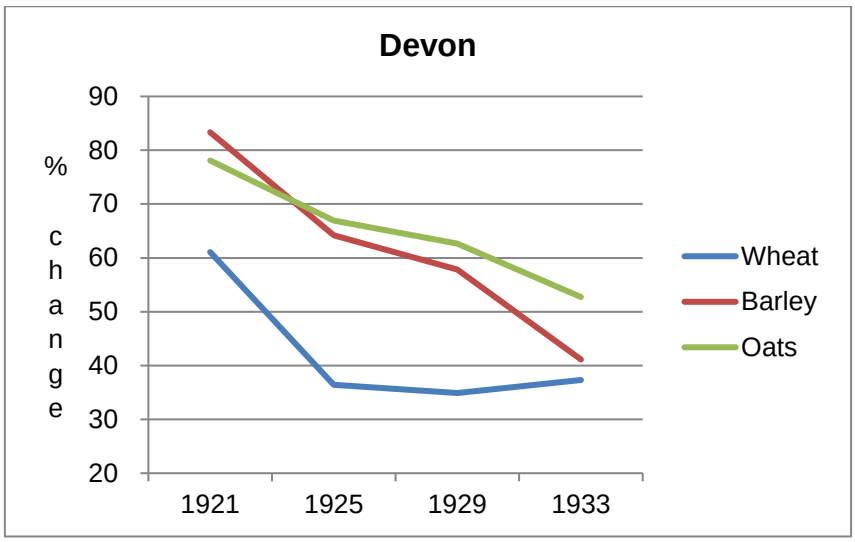

Figure 7: Cereals production in Devon, 1919–33.

Table 2: Corn returns prices

	Average price per cwt (s.d.)		
	Wheat	Barley	Oats
1919	17-0	21-2	18-9
1921	16-8	14-7	12-3
1925	12-2	11-9	9-9
1929	9-10	9-11	8-10
1933	5-4	7-11	5-7

There was a marked decline in cereal growing in Devon, the wheat area dropped rapidly and did not follow the national increase in the early 1930s. Barley followed the national trend and oats declined steadily as the number of horses fell.

Livestock

Table 3: Baseline livestock data

MAF statistics 1919	**England & Wales**	**Devon**
Horses used for agricultural purposes	814,198	33,599
Total horses	*1,386,824*	*57,622*
Cow & heifers	2,553,483	114,838

Bulls	88,978	2,855
Other cattle; two years & above	1,078,103	48,950
Other cattle; one year & under two	1,271,392	77,735
Other cattle; under one year	1,202,583	70,896
Total Cattle	*6,194,539*	*315,274*
Sheep	15,124,313	747,755
Pigs	1,798,468	74,258

Livestock (1919 = 100)

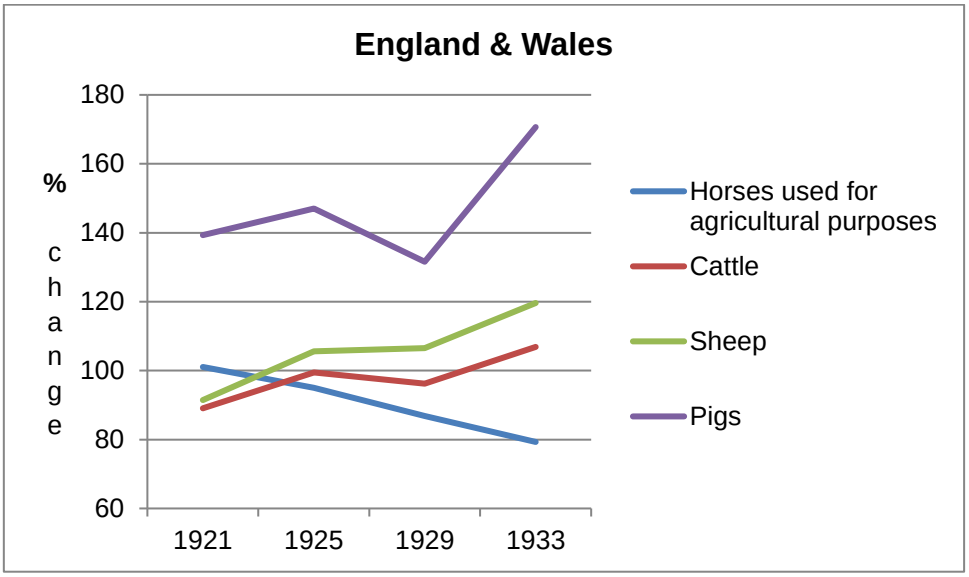

Figure 8: Livestock numbers in England and Wales, 1919–33.

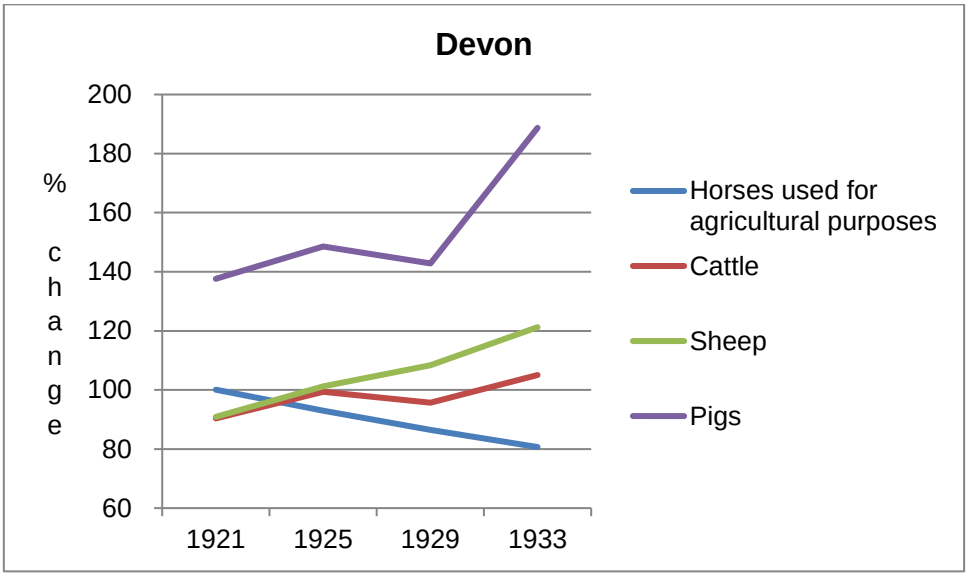

Figure 9: Livestock numbers in Devon, 1919–33.

Although the livestock numbers for Devon followed similar trends to the national statistics, within the aggregated figures there were distinct differences. It should be noted here that the change in horses used for agricultural purposes only accelerated from 1929 onwards.

Disease was a regular occurrence; there was a major outbreak of Foot & Mouth Disease in 1926 and regular outbreaks at county level. Swine fever could devastate the pig populations at a local level, although regular large litters meant pig numbers were better able to rebuild quickly.

Cattle (1919 = 100)

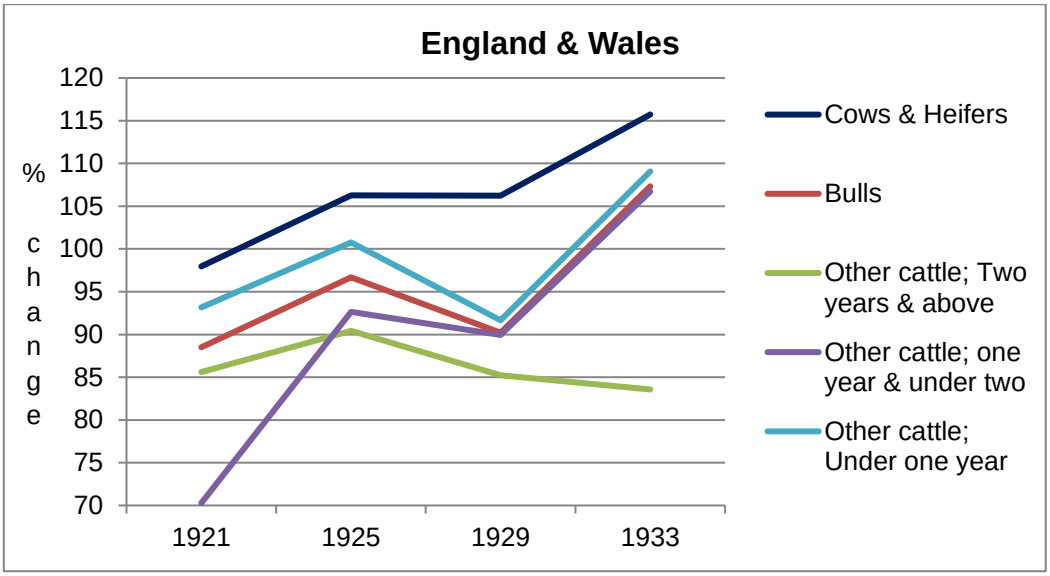

Figure 10: Cattle numbers in England and Wales, 1919–33.

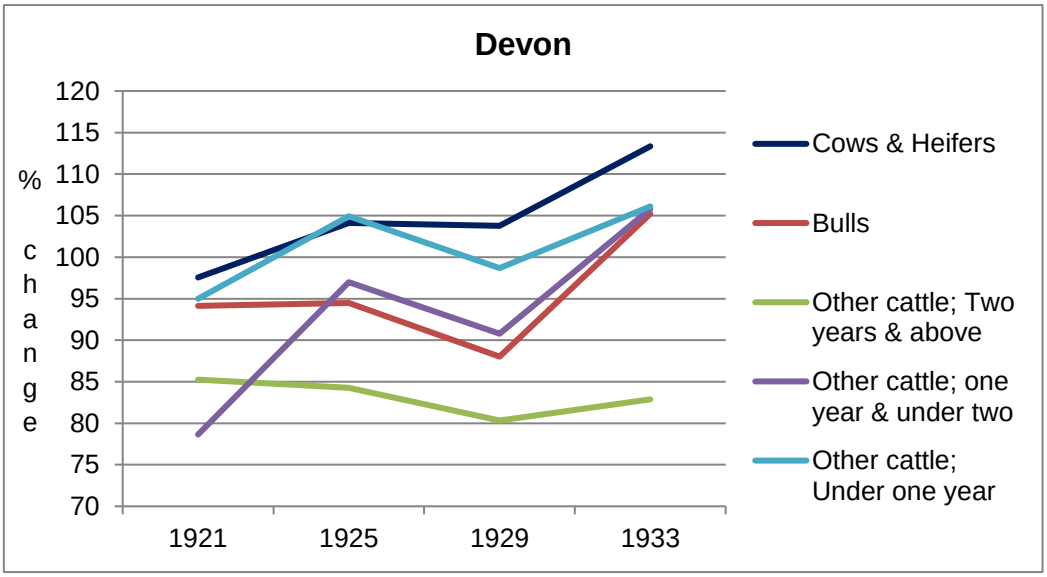

Figure 11: Cattle numbers in Devon, 1919–33.

The 1934 Agricultural Statistics include an extended report on cattle numbers, noting 6 million was first reached in 1915 and, with the exception of 1920–21, stayed at or above that level with a record 6.62 million in 1933. Supplies and prices of beef were restricted in 1919–20 but veal was uncontrolled, leading to an excessive slaughter of calves. This was reported in the opening sentence of an article on Hemyock Show in 1920: 'The slaughter of an exceptionally large number of calves and lambs – one of the most disquieting features of agriculture during the past year – aroused the fear that it would be difficult in the coming years to obtain stock.'[17]

Poultry (1921 = 100)

Poultry statistics were first collected in 1908, then in 1913, 1921, 1924, and annually from 1926.

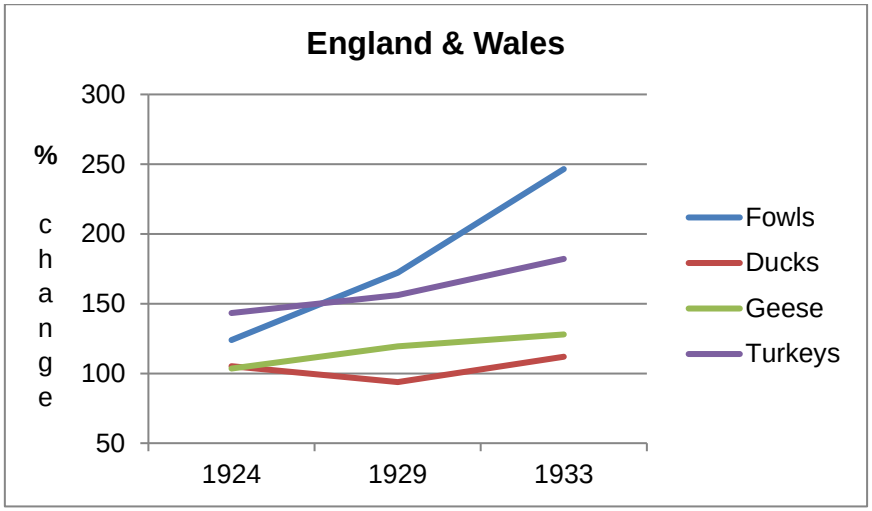

Figure 12: Poultry numbers in England and Wales, 1921–33.

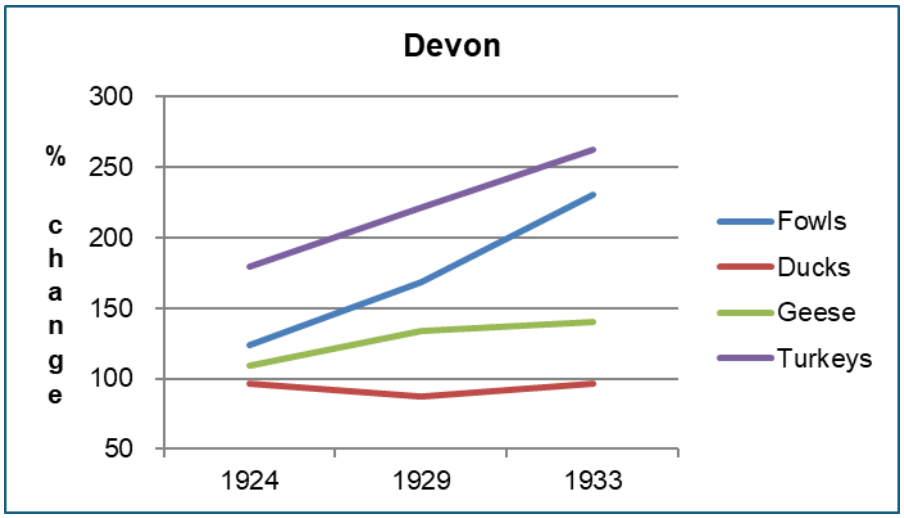

Figure 13: Poultry numbers in Devon, 1921–33.

[17] *Western Times*, 23 September 1920, p. 2.

A major feature of the statistics is the rise in poultry numbers, with Devon ranking in the top five producers for all types of poultry. This followed a decline during the war years when feedstuffs were expensive and difficult to obtain. It was also recognised that obtaining numbers from holdings of one acre or more excluded poultry kept privately, possibly one third or the recorded number;[18] a special enquiry in 1930 revised this to 27% of the total number in annual returns.[19] In Devon, small poultry flocks with local sales had traditionally been the province of the farmer's wife.[20] Improved transport resulted in larger flocks which became part of the farm enterprise.

Land holdings

Devon compared with England and Wales

Table 4: Acreage of agricultural land in England and Wales and Devon, 1919–29

	England and Wales	Devon
1919	26,747,953	1,175,012
1921	26,144,071	1,133,804
1923	25,943,261	1,139,516
1925	25,755,486	1,133,163
1927	25,590,330	1,133,377
1929	25,437,679	1,137,759

The proportion of agricultural land in the county changed little between 1919 and 1929, with a slight decrease in acreage, along a similar trajectory to that for England and Wales as a whole, as shown in Table 4 above. The table shows that in 1929 the acreage of agricultural land in Devon was 96.8% of what it had been in 1921; in England and Wales it was 95.1%. Most of the decrease in agricultural land took place between 1919 and 1921.

The Agricultural Statistics detail numbers of holdings by size, with occasional additional information. Table 5 shows the position in 1919 and Table 6 the position in 1929.

[18] 'Agricultural Statistics', 1921, p. 13.
[19] 'Agricultural Statistics', 1932, p. 51.
[20] Bouquet, Mary. *Family, Servants and Visitors: The Farm Household in 19th and 20th Century Devon*. Geo Books, 1985.

Table 5: Holdings and acreages in 1919

	England and Wales				Devon			
	Total Holdings		Acreage		Total Holdings		Acreage	
	Number	%	Area	%	Number	%	Area	%
1–5 acres	81,193	19	252,908	1	2,379	14	7,192	1
5–20 acres	113,414	27	1,278,989	5	3,565	21	40,966	3
20–50 acres	77,961	19	2,618,916	10	3,075	18	104,534	9
50–100 acres	60,509	15	4,406,826	16	3,337	20	246,756	21
100–150 acres	32,358	8	3,997,042	15	2,042	12	253,302	22
150–300 acres	37,358	9	7,795,458	29	2,086	12	421,493	36
Over 300 acres	13,875	3	6,397,814	24	268	2	100,769	9
Total holdings	**416,668**		**26,747,953**		**16,752**		**1,175,012**	
Average acreage			**64.2**				**70.1**	

Table 6: Holdings and acreages in 1929

	England and Wales				Devon			
	Total Holdings		Acreage		Total Holdings		Acreage	
	Number	%	Area	%	Number	%	Area	%
1–5 acres	74,183	19			2,408	14		
5–20 acres	105,950	27			3,847	22		
20–50 acres	78,195	20			3,425	20		
50–100 acres	61,699	15			3,620	20		
100–150 acres	31,897	8			2,086	12		
150–300 acres	35,052	9			1,830	11		
Over 300 acres	12,271	3			204	1		
Total holdings	**399,247**		**27,437,679**		**17,420**		**1,137,759**	
Average acreage			**63.7**				**65.3**	

Only the 1919 statistics give the acreage within each category; Table 5 shows that Devon had fewer holdings of up to 20 acres but more of 50 acres and above, compared to England and Wales. The 45% of holdings between 50 and 300 acres covered 78% of Devon's acreage, compared with 31% of holdings and 61% of acreage for England and Wales. The proportions had not shifted materially by 1929. There was some change of use of land, particularly when land was redeveloped from agricultural use to housing, as was the case on the edge of many town communities, but above all in the Plymstock and Wembury areas on the edge of Plymouth, studied for the 1920s project by Anne Corry.[21]

One of the areas where change to land holding was prompted by local government action was the growth of smallholdings in the 1920s which was facilitated by action by Devon County Council, empowered by the Land Settlement (Facilities) Act 1919. Clare Greener wrote a study of this for the Devon in the 1920s research collection, highlighting as an example the creation of fifty smallholdings from four farms in the Dawlish area. The Act had been designed to reward ex-servicemen for their war service by creating jobs and homes and training the men (and some women) for new careers and, incidentally, to help revitalise rural communities. There was certainly a demand for such smallholdings throughout the 1920s, although not everyone managed to make a success of the business. In 1927 the county's waiting list for holdings was 5,821, of whom 2,522 had already been approved and were awaiting the award of a holding.

Nationally, owner-occupation in 1919 comprised 11.7% of holdings and 12.3% of acreage; by 1921 it had risen to 16.8% of holdings and to 23% in 1924. An extra effort was made in 1927, due to the reluctance to supply ownership details, giving revised figures of 36.6% of holdings and 36% of land owner occupied. Although the suggestion that a quarter of England's land changed hands in the early 1920s has now been modified considerably downwards,[22] there were indeed a greater number of land sales in Devon in the period 1919–24 than had been the case in the preceding five years.[23] Many tenant farmers had been able to buy the farms they rented when estates came up for sale. When Lord Poltimore sold the farms in and around Poltimore village in 1921, three of the six went to the existing tenants, sometimes facilitated by a loan from Lord Poltimore himself.[24] Similar

[21] Anne Corry, *Plymstock Housing in the 1920s,* in the Devon in the 1920s research collection. www.devonhistorysociety.org.uk.
[22] John Beckett and Michael Turner 'End of the Old Order? F.M.L. Thompson, the Land Question and the burden of ownership in England c.1880–c.1925' in *Agricultural History Review*, 55(2) (2007), pp. 269–88.
[23] Julia Neville, *Review of the 1920s 'Fates' of Devon Estates of 1500 Acres and Over, As Listed in the 1873 Survey of Landowners*, in the Devon in the 1920s research collection, www.devonhistorysociety.org.uk
[24] Hartland Archives, *Poltimore Letter Books,* HaB-LTR-037, Jan to Dec 1919. The Poltimore Estate Research Society is grateful to Sir Hugh Stucley for permission to use material from this archive, which is not open to the public.

purchases by tenants are noted at other land sales. Tom Robins bought South Lydcott farm in High Bray when the estate was sold in 1919; and in 1921 W. S. Lynn bought Hill Farm at Sherford at the Buckland Tout Saints estate sale.[25] Other properties were sold to those who had been tenants elsewhere, resulting in notice to quit being given to those who had occupied these farms.

Variations in farming in Devon[26]

Crops and grass

Crops

Between 1920 and 1929, the areas of all types of corn declined across Devon – wheat by 47%, barley by 42%, oats by 29% and mixed corn by 23%. Within that decline there were variations between the study areas. The different patterns are illustrated in the graphs below.

Wheat

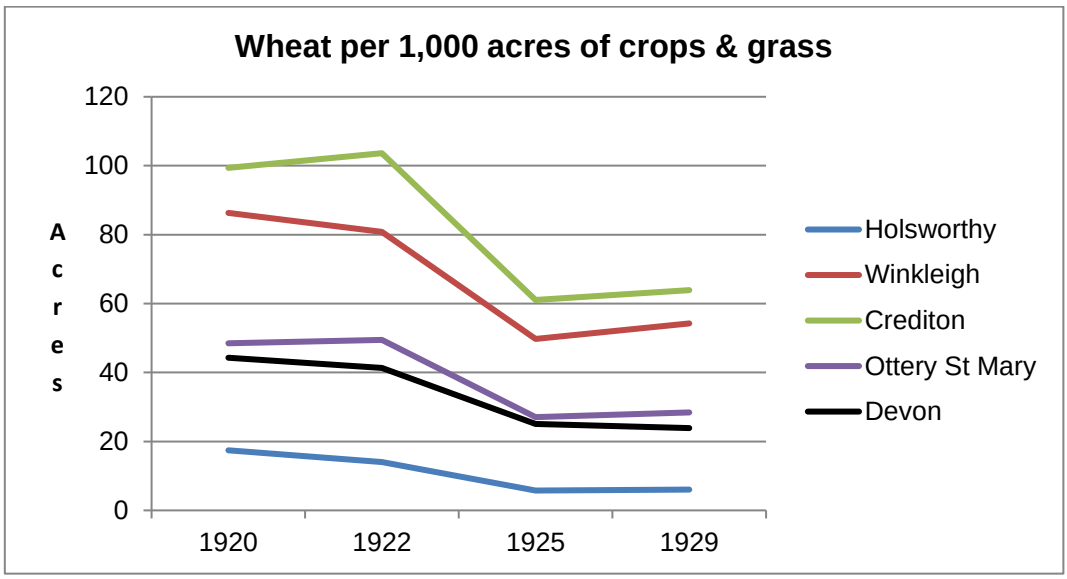

Figure 14: Wheat per 1,000 acres of crops and grass in Devon, 1920–29.

Long noted that mid-Devon was one of the main areas of tillage and had the heavier soils suitable for wheat; in contrast, the Holsworthy area and North Cornwall coast had much lighter and less suitable land. The slight increase in the Crediton area between 1920 and 1922 amounted to only 100 acres. The graph shows that the areas growing the most wheat at the start of the period had the greatest decline, again illustrating the reversion to earlier forms of farming after the period of

[25] Stuart Windsor, *Introduction to the Tom Robins Papers*, a family history for the Devon in the 1920s project; *Western Morning News*, 13 August 1921.

[26] The data on which the graphs shown in this section are based are those collected for the Devon in the 1920s project, as shown in the Appendix to this paper.

'ploughing up' during the war. During the 1920s, straw was an important part of the crop, as wheat straw was used for thatching houses, farm buildings and ricks of unthreshed corn. Thatching was one of the practical tasks for which instruction was given by Devon County Council.

Barley

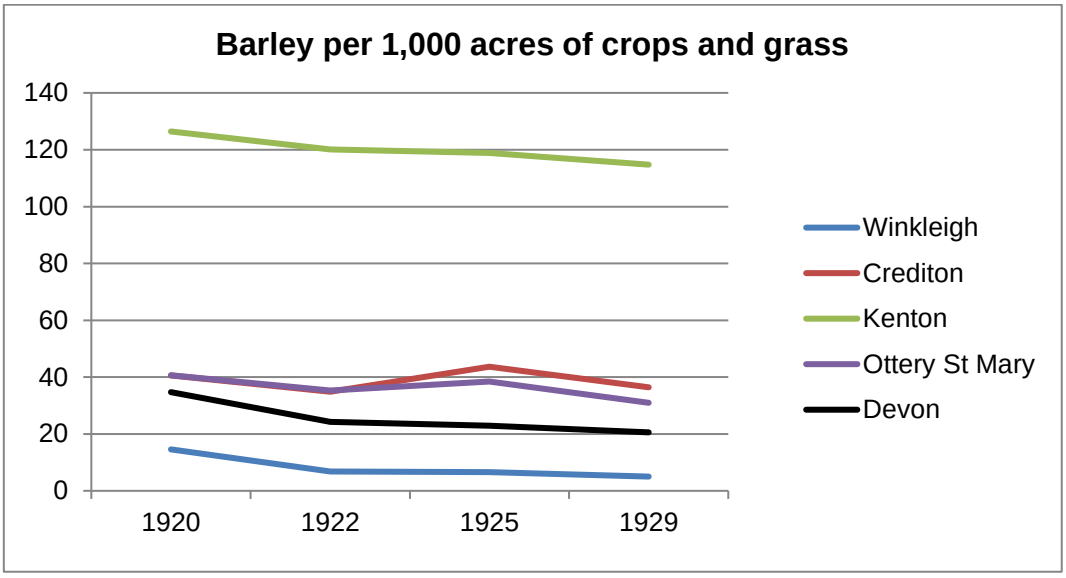

Figure 15: Barley per 1,000 acres of crops and grass in Devon, 1920–29.

The lighter soils and rain shadow created by the Haldon Hills combine to make the Kenton area good for barley. Long observed that where conditions were suitable, barley was grown extensively and provided a good sample for malting, but it was not widely grown elsewhere.

Oats

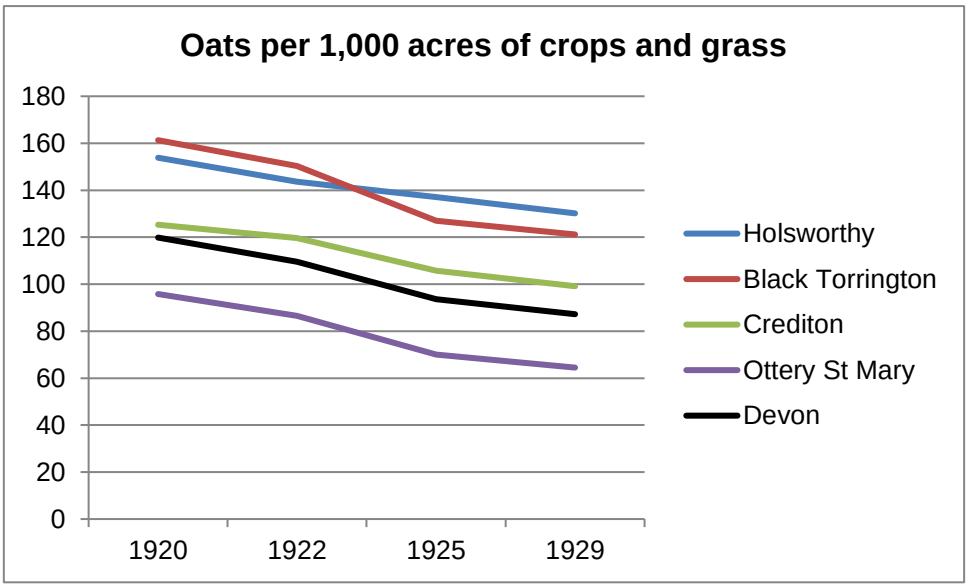

Figure 16: Oats per 1,000 acres of crops and grass in Devon, 1920–29.

In the 1920s oats were the most grown cereal crop in Devon: 56% of the total corn crop in 1920, rising to 60% in 1929. However, the total area of oats declined from 139,000 acres to 99,000 acres in the same period. The decline in area accompanied the decline in the number of agricultural horses.

Oats tended to be grown in the higher, colder and wetter areas of Devon, where wheat and barley provided less competition, Long observed that they were found more in North Devon, from Torrington to the Cornish coast.[27] In the Holsworthy and Black Torrington areas, oats rose from 70% to 75% of the corn crop between 1920 and 1929; for Devon as a whole the proprtion rose from 56% to 60%.

Fodder roots

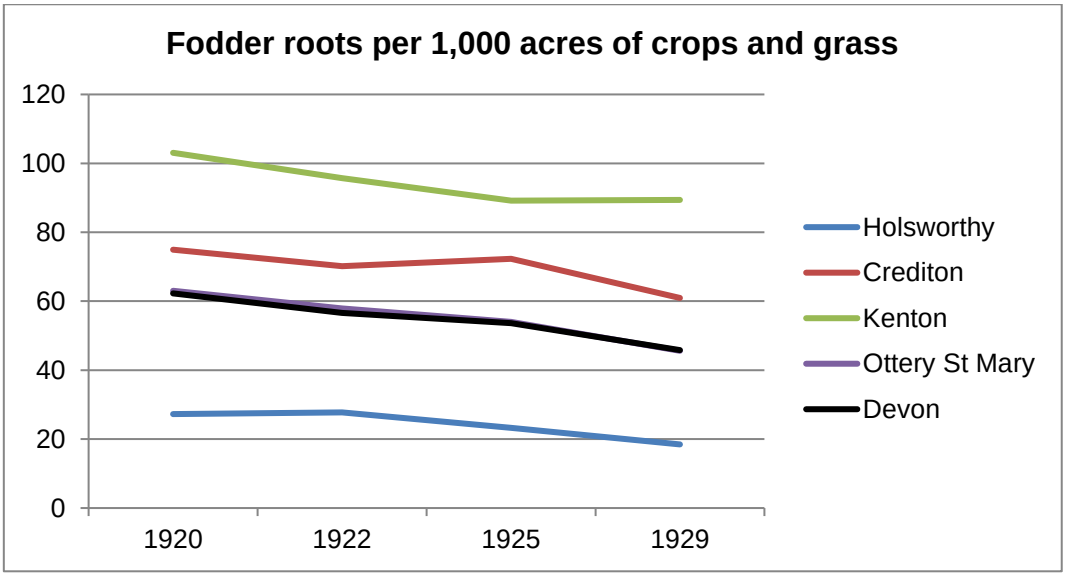

Figure 17: Fodder roots per 1,000 acres of crops and grass in Devon, 1920–29.

Swedes, turnips and mangels were grown for winter fodder for cattle and horses. They required a lot of labour for planting, hoeing, lifting and storing for use during the winter; this could be in clamps, piles covered in an insulating layer of straw, or in one of the root houses that were a regular feature of farm buildings. Particularly when constructed of cob, these would be well insulated to avoid losses due to frost.

The quantity of roots grown in Kenton is surprising as the area was below the county average for both cattle and horses. However, looking at parish level detail, it appears likely that the crops were

[27] Long, p. 49.

grown for a large population of dairy cows in the Exeter parishes. Parishes closer to the city – Exminster, Kenn and Kenton – had high acreages as did Broadclyst and Whitestone, to the east and west of the city respectively. The Ottery St Mary area almost exactly matches the Devon figures.

In contrast, Holsworthy was above average for cattle and horses, but grew less corn and fodder crops; temporary grass was very similar to Black Torrington.

Small fruit, vegetables (including potatoes) and orchards

The picture of Devon at the end of the 1920s, as far as growing small fruit, vegetables and orchards is concerned, shows an overall profile of only a very limited area devoted to small fruit and vegetables (less than 1% of the acreage devoted to crops and grass as a whole). Potatoes accounted overall for 3.3% of the acreage and orchards 4.4%. Compared with the profile for England and Wales as a whole, Devon has a slightly higher percentage devoted to potatoes (E&W = 1.2%), less devoted to orchards (E&W = 5.6%) and both for small fruit and vegetables the proportions nationally and in the county are too insignificant to show up.

Small fruit and orchards

Overall, the change in acreage devoted to small fruit growing during the 1920s was minimal; small variations in either direction on a low base resulted across the decade in an overall reduction of slightly more than 10%. Four of the study areas in mid and north-west Devon and on the Blackdown Hills grew virtually no soft fruit at all.

Coastal and estuarine areas

The parish of Bere Ferrers, on the Devon side of the Tamar estuary, on the other hand, maintained its exceptional position, with over 250 acres under small fruit cultivation throughout the decade. On its own it accounted for about a third of the total acreage in the county devoted to strawberry growing in 1929. Devon County Council's Agricultural Education Committee recognised the importance of the intensive fruit and flower cultivation in the Tamar Valley, which they wished to support, and in 1924 identified that 'cultivators were handicapped in working out the best varieties … for their soil and climate … certain special disease problems … unexpected failures of standard crops.' They agreed to establish a 'small experimental and demonstration station' to which local growers would contribute up to £50.[28] Regular reports thereafter noted the progress at the Bere Ferrers demonstration station.

[28] Report of the Devon Agricultural Committee to Devon County Council, 18 December 1924, para 16 (a).

Clive Charlton and Frances Howard described how the cultivation, not only of soft fruit but of early vegetables and spring flowers, had evolved in market gardens and orchards in the Bere Peninsula, demonstrating the impetus to cultivation given by the arrival of the railway in 1890; the sale of land by the Earl of Mount Edgcumbe in 1919, when most tenants bought their properties; turnover amongst fruit growers; the changes in the 1920s to the fruit grower families; and the principal varieties of fruit and flowers grown.[29]

Although Bere Ferrers was exceptional, coastal and estuarine areas of South Devon in general – from Plymstock on the Yealm to the plats around Branscombe in East Devon – were prime sites for growing vegetables that were ready in advance of those in other parts of the country. The statistics demonstrate small fruit cultivation on the Exe estuary, in particular in the market gardens in and around Topsham. Gill McLean in 'Back to Business in Topsham: Vegetables, Fruit and Flowers in the 1920s' described a similar impetus given by the arrival of the railway in the 1860s as the prompt to send vegetables not just to Exeter but to Covent Garden.[30] One of the local families, Pynes, grew gooseberries, raspberries, strawberries, loganberries, blackberries and rhubarb, offering twenty-three varieties of rhubarb and sixty-nine varieties of gooseberries.

On the other side of the Exe estuary local market gardeners, including some of the ex-First World War soldiers trained as smallholders by Devon County Council at Holcombe,[31] from where Lewis Milford sent his produce down by pony and trap to Dawlish station. Reg Colley remembered how the 'violet train' left Starcross station every evening for Covent Garden 'loaded with produce from Dawlish Road, Port Road, Cockwood, Starcross and Kenton'. When it was violet time the whole train smelt of violets. The empty boxes were sent back down and the market gardeners' agent would receive and distribute them.[32]

Devon's 1920s' small fruit growing continued the tradition of the pre-war period, exploiting the early-ripening of local fruit. There was no substantial expansion, in contrast with the situation in Cambridgeshire, described in detail by Jonathan Spain, where the demand for fruit for jam from

[29] Clive Charlton and Frances Howard, *Market Gardens and Orchards on the Bere Peninsula: Continuity and Change,* 2022, Presentation in the Devon in the 1920s Research Materials Collection.
[30] Gill McLean, 'Back to Business in Topsham: Vegetables, Fruit and Flowers in the 1920s', presentation made at the Devon in the 1920s Presentation in the Devon in the 1920s Research Collection; see also Adcock, Anna, *Market Gardening in Topsham* (Topsham Museum, 2020).
[31] Clare Greener, *Returning Servicemen and the Growth of Smallholdings*, essay in the Devon in the 1920s collection
[32] Reg Colley, *Voices of Starcross*, Part 1, p. 39. https://starcrosshistory.blogspot.com/2023/02/reg-colley-looking-back.html. Accessed 25 August 2924.

factories such as those Chivers had developed at the turn of the century was increased by the factories switch to canning facilities in the 1920s.[33] Indeed, the six jam manufacturers listed in *Kelly's Directory* in 1919 had reduced by 1930 to one only, the Devonshire Jam and Pickle Company in Plymouth.[34]

Orchards and the production of cider

Cultivated orchards in Devon are almost entirely apple orchards, with a few pear, plum and cherry orchards, primarily for local use. Michael Gee, writing generally about orchard cultivation in Devon, points out that Devon has always been a 'relatively modest producer' by comparison with Kent, Worcestershire and Herefordshire, a fact that he attributes to 'the scarcity of sites with the right aspect, climate, soil and shelter from wind and frost'.[35] However, the 1920s' statistics for orchard cultivation, unlike those for soft fruit, do show a general increase of about 3%, with growth in all areas except Holsworthy and West Dartmoor. The strongest increase, of about 18%, occurred in the Ottery St Mary area, where there had already been a high level of cultivation, with 2,200 acres of orchard noted in 1919. Both the general increase and the specific increase in the Ottery St Mary area can be linked with the expansion of Whiteways cider factory at Whimple. The factory, established at the end of the nineteenth century, was substantially developed during the 1920s, aided by the lifting of the Cider and Perry duty in 1923. Cider production at Whiteways rose from 414,000 gallons in 1919 to 2,300,000 gallons in 1929; and the number of farmers in contract to Whiteways rose from 540 to 1,243, a number that Whiteways boasted about in their national advertising campaigns.[36] Gee suggests that such a rise is not solely attributable to an increase in numbers of orchards but to the fact that farmers were less inclined to brew their own cider and preferred to send their apples away for processing.[37]

Gee also suggests that although the numbers of farmers selling apples to Whiteways did increase dramatically, they made little money out of their sales. (The price paid did fluctuate, but was only £4 per tonne in 1919 and £4.50 in 1929).[38] The profit was insufficient to encourage farmers to invest in orchard improvement and the planting of new trees. This led Devon County Council and Whiteways to collaborate in the second half of the 1920s on three initiatives. The first was an orchard improvement competition, called the *Whiteways Orchards Competition*, with a cup and a

[33] Jonathan Spain, *Fruit Farming in the Cam Valley* (RiverRhee Publishing, 2021), pp. 206–08, 265–67.
[34] Kelly's *Devonshire Directory* (Kelly's Directories Ltd., 1919), pp. 1039; 1930, p. 1150.
[35] Michael Gee, *The Devon Orchards Book* (Halsgrove 2018), pp.11–13.
[36] E. V. M. Whitehead, *Whiteway's Cider: A Company History* (David and Charles, 1990), pp.160, 47.
[37] Gee, op.cit, p. 77.
[38] Ibid., p. 160.

cash prize awarded. In 1926 this produced fourteen entries from East Devon and six from South Devon, though none from North or West Devon.[39] The second initiative was a scheme to encourage the planting of new apple trees, under which Whiteways would offer a bonus of ten trees for every 100 planted. The interest thus stimulated prompted the county to set up orchard renovation classes, demonstrations and advisory visits.[40]

In addition to what the Whiteways were able to achieve, some farmers did begin to develop and market their own cider. In the HL areas, Sam Inch of Winkleigh began production in 1916.[41] In Crediton, William Burrow, the landlord of the White Hart Inn, established a business that was to become the nucleus of the Creedy Valley Cider Company in the 1930s.[42] When Leonard Elmhirst was remodelling farming at Dartington in the second half of the 1920s, his manager of the Orchards Department, Roger Morel, had to tackle the replanting of ten orchards, representing about 30 acres. Between 1927 and 1929 Morel set to work reconditioning, grubbing out old trees and replanting. He then established cider production at Shinners Bridge and also (in line with the Dartington ethos) experimented with growing new varieties of apple.[43]

Vegetable and potato cultivation

Vegetable cultivation throughout the decade was universal, but the acreage devoted to it was generally low – less than 0.2% of the total areas of crops and grass almost everywhere. Around the urban area of Exeter and along the Exe estuary, in areas 10b and 10c, the rate did rise to 3/1,000 acres by the end of the decade. This seems likely to be attributable not only to the existence of a large urban population with little access to their own space for growing vegetables, and large markets, but also to the early cropping noted above in the discussion on small fruit. A similar pattern can be shown in Bere Ferrers, again on the edge of an urban area and with a tradition of sending early crops to market. From the other side of Plymouth, Robert Rowland, from one of the market gardening families in Plymstock, remembered how his grandfather Charlie had made 'a good living, growing cauliflowers (they had their own variety) savoy and spring cabbage, peas, beans, potatoes, marrows, rhubarb, lettuce, chipple (or spring onions) and anemones' with up to

[39] DCC Agricultural Committee 1926, 18 March, minute 10; 26 September, minute 10.
[40] DCC Agricultural Committee, 15 December 1927, para 7.
[41] *Sam's Cider*, 'The History of our Proper Devon Cider, https://winkleighcider.co.uk/blogs/news/1916-the-beginning. Accessed 27 August 2024.
[42] *Sandford,* 'Breathing Life Back Into the Oldest Cider Mill', https://www.sandfordorchards.co.uk/blog/oldest-cider-mill. Accessed 27 August 2024.
[43] Michael Young, *The Elmhirsts of Dartington: The Creation of a Utopian Community* (Dartington Hall, 1982) p. 274; Gee, op. cit., p. 73.

three crops a year. Plymstock market gardens, he said, supplied the Plymouth market and Tamar Valley gardens Devonport.[44]

The cultivation of potatoes had been one of the areas that the government had pushed farmers to increase during the latter stages of the First World War. Devon farmers had made considerable efforts to do so, with 20,000 acres of potatoes in 1918 compared with the 10,000 before the war.[45] The trajectory in the 1920s is downward in most areas, as farmers resumed their normal practice. The only exceptions to this in the HL areas under study are in the Moretonhampstead area and the Crediton sub-area (Area 10 Crediton)

Harwood Long, in his 1933 article on farming in the southwestern counties, drew attention to 'an area situated between Exeter and Dartmoor which is noted for its production of maincrop potatoes', and contrasting it with the rest of the county where 'few farms [grew] more than sufficient to provide for the farm family and for the labourers.' This tradition went back a long way, and was linked by Long to the nature of the soil, and also to the discouragement of stock farming by the Torquay Waterworks Company on areas around their gathering grounds.[46] The continuing nature of this tradition is demonstrated in the statistics by the acreage devoted to potatoes, 18/1,000 acres in the Crediton area but as many as 62/1,000 in the Moretonhampstead area throughout the decade.

[44] Robert Rowland, *Plymstock in the 1920s,* family history contribution to the Devon in the 1920s project, April 2020.
[45] Anne Kaile, 'Potato Growing in Devon during the First World War', in *Food, Farming and Fishing in Devon During the First World War* (Devon History Society, 2016), p. 62. https://www.devonhistorysociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Food-Farming-and-Fishing-in-Devon.pdf. Accessed 28 August 2024.
[46] W. Harwood Long, 'The South-Western Counties', Chapter IX in J.P. Maxton (ed.), *Regional Types of British Agriculture* (George Allen and Unwin, 1936), p. 180.

Grass

Temporary grass

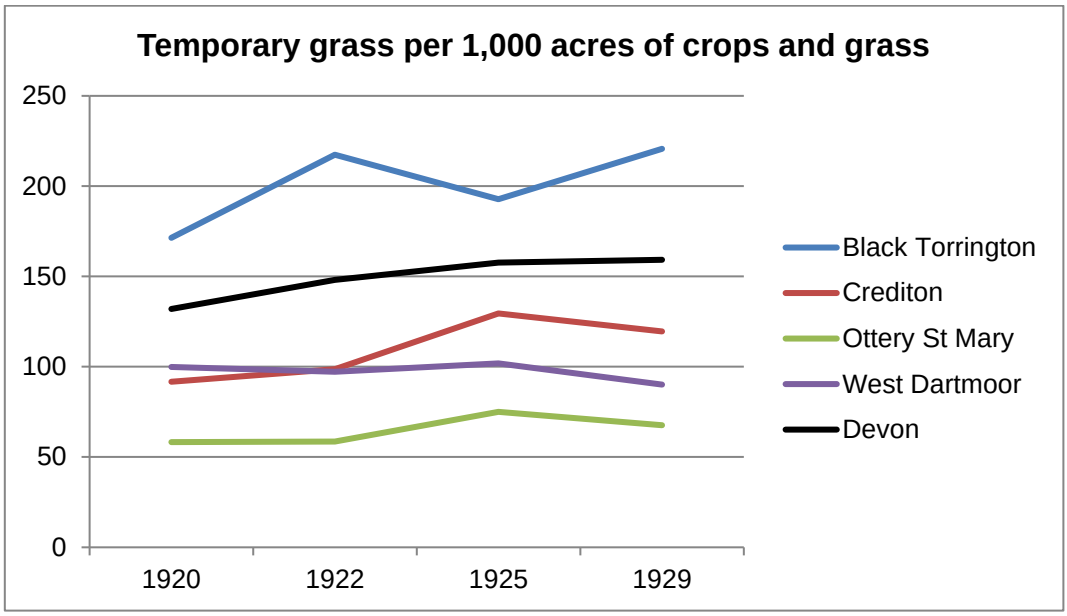

Figure 18: Temporary grass per 1,000 acres of crops and grass in Devon, 1920–29.

The term ‘temporary grass’ may have been defined differently by the farmers completing the returns. For some it would be grass grown as part of a rotation of crops with corn and roots; for others it may have been the early years of grass sown for permanent pasture, but when they became classified as permanent is not known.

Black Torrington and the other northwest Devon areas, plus the Moretonhampstead area, were above the county average; in these areas temporary grass increased as corn growing declined. Around Ottery St Mary less corn was grown but more fodder roots and permanent grass; West Dartmoor had very little corn or roots and relied on grass.

Permanent grass

Growing permanent grass was the predominant use of land in Devon and shows a gradual and relatively consistent increase within each area, some of which will be attributable to a return to the pre-war situation.

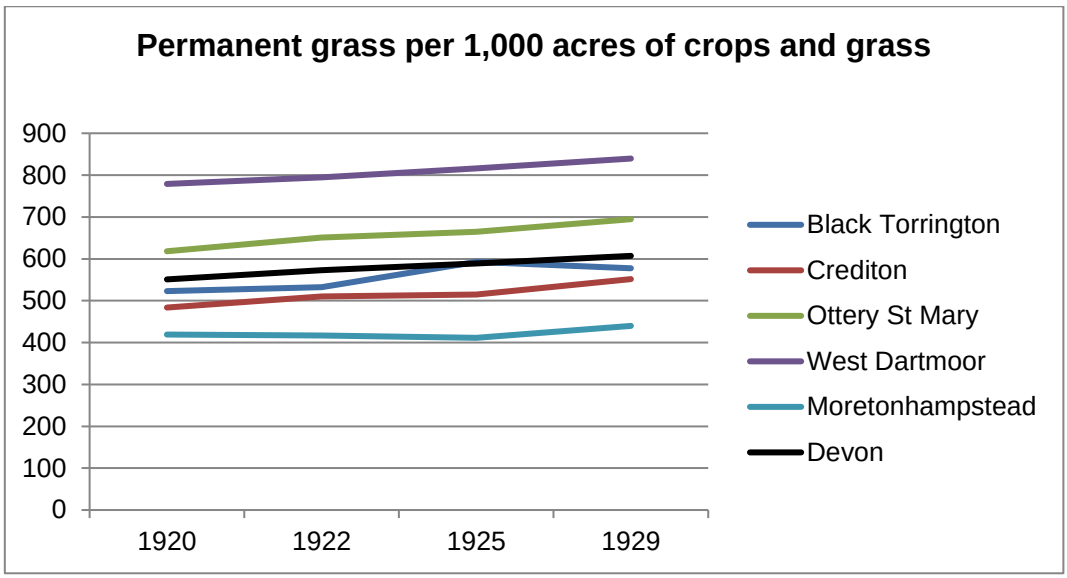

Figure 19: Permanent grass per 1,000 acres of crops and grass in Devon, 1920–29.

Livestock

Cattle

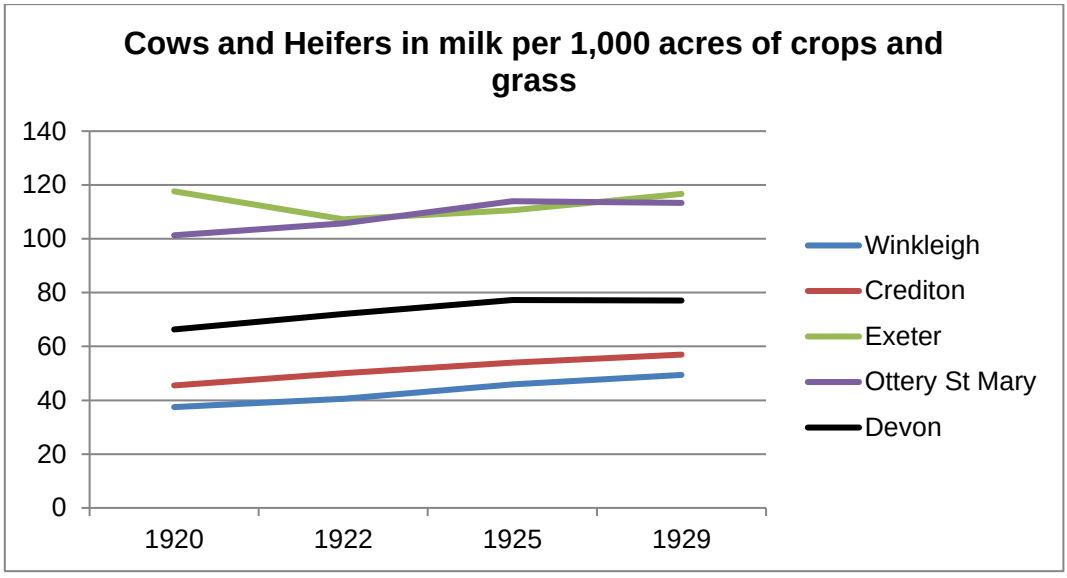

Figure 20: Cows and heifers in milk per 1,000 acres of crops and grass in Devon, 1920–29.

Although referred to by Long as 'Dairy cattle', the main breeds of North and South Devon were dual purpose, used for milk and beef production; there were also many cattle of mixed breeds. East Devon was the main area for cattle, where there were two rail links to London for the sale of liquid milk in addition to the local market of Exeter. Long notes that much of the milk produced here was from small farms and was used for manufacturing. He also commented on the small farms around Plymouth being heavily stocked with cattle.[47]

[47] Long, p. 55.

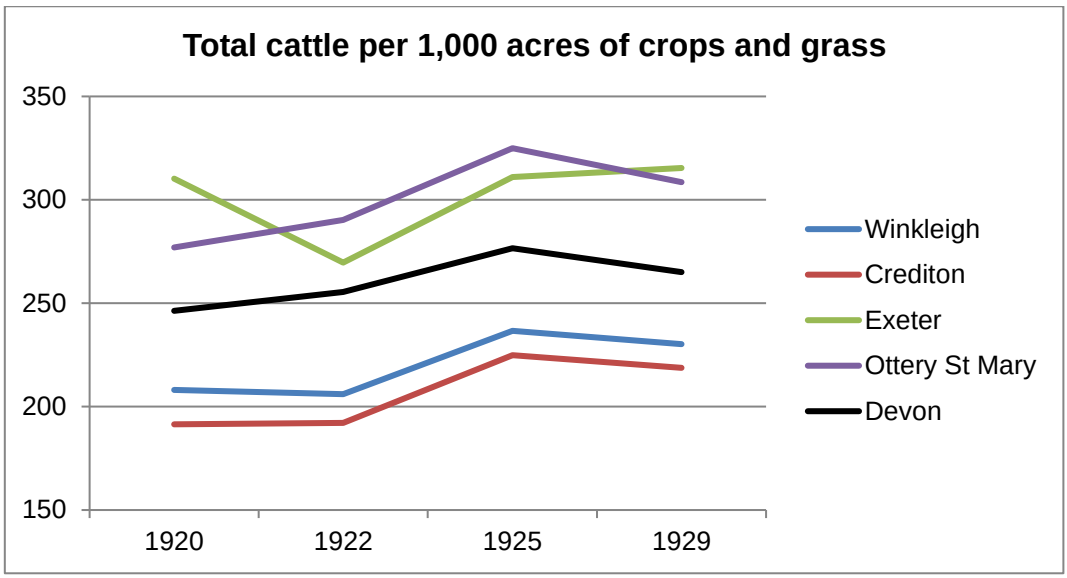

Figure 21: Total cattle per 1,000 acres of crops and grass in Devon, 1920–29.

For Devon as a whole, cow and heifer numbers increased, bulls decreased slightly. Calves increased to 1925 then declined slightly, cattle aged 1 to 2 years peaked in 1925 and then declined to 1920 levels and cattle over 2 years declined by 25%. The latter was at the time when beef producers were being encouraged to supply the smaller animals required by the market, so beasts were marketed at an earlier age. The changes in per 1,000 acres of crops and grass numbers in Exeter are exacerbated by the small total number of cattle; 1,635 in 1920 and 1,532 in 1929, down 6% compared to Ottery St Mary's 18,722 in 1920 and 19,953 in 1929, up 7%. In Winkleigh, numbers increased by 13%, with cows and heifers in milk up by 37%; without more information on the production system (dairy or beef), it is difficult to determine the reasons for this. Overall, Devon cattle numbers increased by 5%.

Horses

Across the county, horses declined by 25% and unbroken horses and foals by over 60%. Ottery St Mary followed the county pattern almost exactly. The high number per 1,000 acres of crops and grass for West Dartmoor is almost certainly a reflection of the ponies that would have been grazing the moorland. Although MAF collected different categories of common grazing statistics during the 1920s, by 1929 there were about 50,000 acres in addition to the 9,000 acres of crops and grass for the parishes concerned. This area had a particularly large fall of nearly 75% in the actual number of unbroken horses and foals, although an increase of 43% in the number of 'other' horses against a decrease across Devon of 23%. In Exeter, a decline of 29% 'other' horses could be due to motorised transport replacing milk delivery horses.

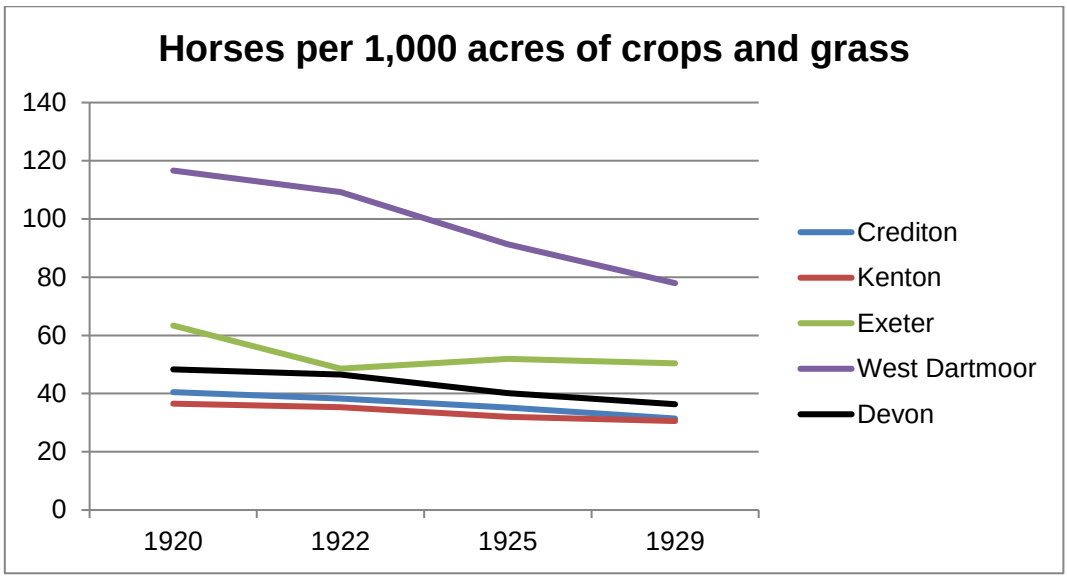

Figure 22: Total horses per 1,000 acres of crops and grass in Devon, 1920–29.

Sheep

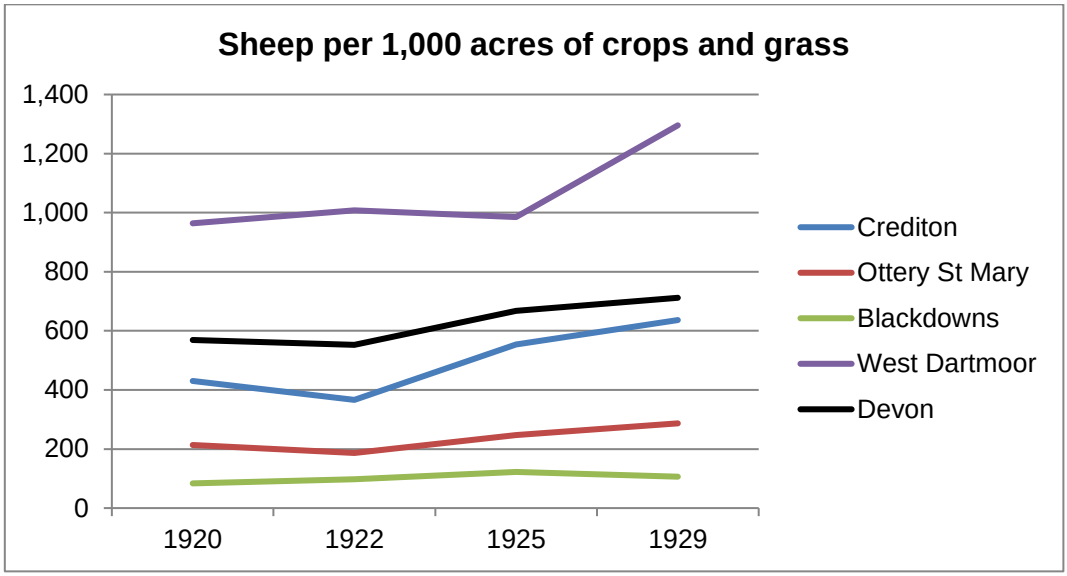

Figure 23: Total sheep per 1,000 acres of crops and grass in Devon, 1920–29.

Figures for West Dartmoor are again influenced by the amount of common grazing, total numbers increased by 20%, just below the county figure of 22%. In the Crediton area, the total number increased by 42%; Long observed that North Devon was an important area for sheep and where rough grazing and commons were prevalent.[48]

[48] Long, p. 55.

Pigs

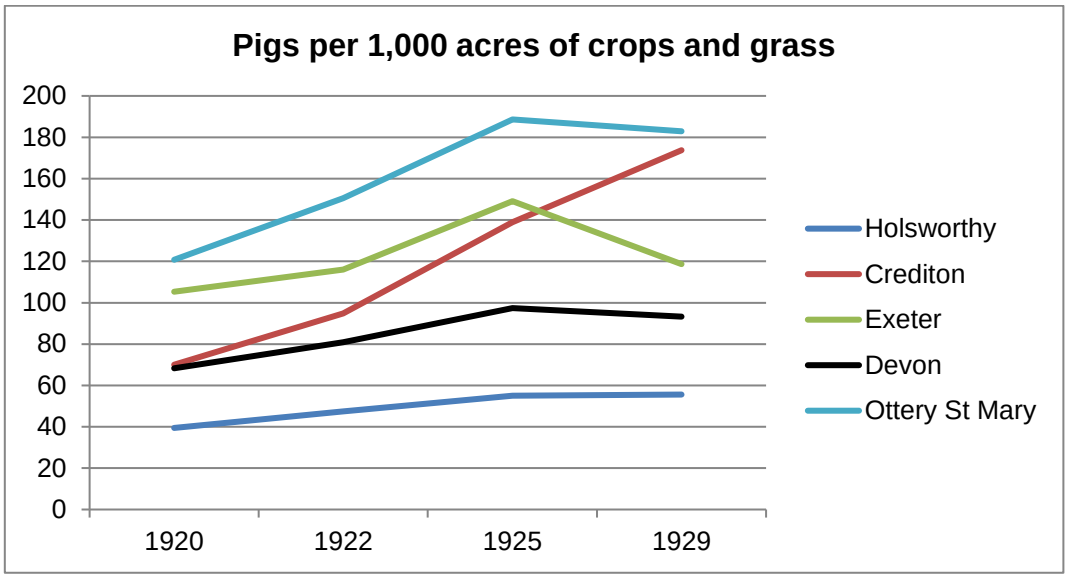

Figure 24: Total pigs per 1,000 acres of crops and grass in Devon, 1920–29.

Long commented on the large number of pigs in Devon and Cornwall, nearly 10% of the total for England and Wales. Within Devon, the east of the county and a small area around Plymouth were heavily stocked with pigs.[49] Long went on to attribute this to the number of small dairy farms that traditionally used the separated milk, left as a byproduct of manufacturing butter, for feeding pigs. However, changes such as improving the production of milk powder, which was the subject of experiments at Hemyock,[50] reduced the amount of skimmed milk available. The number of pigs in East Devon, although remaining well above the Devon average, did not increase after the mid-1920s. In Exeter, the decline could be attributed to the desire to eliminate the number of backyard pigs in the city, which may well have spilled over to holdings over 1 acre. Numbers in Crediton rose significantly, despite a much discussed bacon factory failing to be established.

Pig numbers were subject to fluctuation due to a number of outbreaks of swine fever; these were so common that little was reported in the local papers and they just appear as numbers of outbreaks in DCC's Agricultural Committee reports.

Poultry

Poultry barely existed as an industry in the UK before 1890, being kept on a farmyard or cottage scale often as the preserve of women. It received little official attention until 1921–22, when a

[49] Long, p. 60.
[50] Clist, B, and C Dracott. The Book of Hemyock: The Heart of the Blackdowns. Halsgrove, 2001

National Institute for Poultry Husbandry was set up at Harper Adams College in Shropshire,[51] part of the post-war development of agricultural research.

Trading in poultry was traditionally the province of higglers – itinerant traders who travelled around by horse and cart dealing in dairy, poultry and game.[52] *Kelly's Directory* of Devon and Cornwall for 1914 records two higglers in Devon: Wilfrid Lavis at Bridestowe, near Okehampton, and William Mogford at Rose Ash, between Tiverton and South Molton, although many more traders would have been carrying out similar roles. These were succeeded by specialist poulterers and game dealers, some of whom also had butchers, such as C. H. Ellis in Braunton. The local and regional papers of the 1920s carry many advertisements asking for suppliers of poultry and game from Devon companies and also from Dorset, London and South Wales, all offering good prices.

Many birds were slaughtered and prepared on farms and taken to local markets and poulterers; Devon County Council had a travelling poultry school providing on-farm instruction in poultry preparation.

Poultry keeping was promoted as an occupation for soldiers returning after the First World War, in combination with the provision of smallholdings by the county council. A county poultry adviser was also appointed in August 1919.[53] He was in the post throughout the 1920s.

The county council also set up competitive egg laying trials in 1925, to identify birds that were reliable egg producers and to promote their use. The report of the first trial period was minuted by the Agriculture Committee in December 1925, with a note from MAF that Devon was one of ten counties with such trials.[54] The county also promoted the distribution of fertilised fowl and duck eggs and day-old chicks and ducklings, initially with financial help from MAF for record books, egg stamps etc. At the same meeting, it was reported the laying trials in the previous ten months totalled 30,011 eggs. A conference was organised for October 1926 to show MAF's poultry husbandry film and distribute prizes in connection with the 1925–26 trials.[55]

[51] P Hewson, 'Origin and Development of the British Poultry Industry', p. 525, Accessed 8 November 2023. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071668608416912.
[52] 'Egg and Poultry Industry Conference - History'. Accessed 20 May 2022. https://epiconference.co.uk/introduction/.
[53] 'DCC Agriculture Committee', 12 March 1925, p. 3.
[54] 'DCC Agriculture Committee', 17 December 1925, p. 2.
[55] 'DCC Agriculture Committee', 23 September 1926, p. 1.

Colin Ross, the county agricultural adviser, reported to a Wrangaton and Totnes Devon Farmers Union meeting in 1927 that poultry should be seen as a serious farm enterprise and not a sideline; the year's laying trials had achieved increased production from 172 to 183 eggs per bird in a practical way. If this was replicated across the county, it would raise income by £25,000. Balanced rations, as with milk production, were crucial; they could receive a record graph that would enable the county poultry adviser to suggest practical ways of improvement.[56]

In 1931, it was reported that:

> the trials have undoubtedly been of great value to the poultry industry in Devon and they have been well supported by the competitors, who pay £50 yearly in entry fees. This contributed to the trials making a surplus, after MAF grant aid had been considered.[57]

Statistics of crops and livestock on holdings over 1 acre were collected by MAF in June each year. Numbers of poultry – fowls, ducks, geese and turkeys – were first collected in 1908, then in 1913, 1921, 1924 and annually from 1926.

After the First World War, when feeding stuffs were expensive and difficult to obtain, there was a rise in poultry numbers and Devon became a leading supplier.

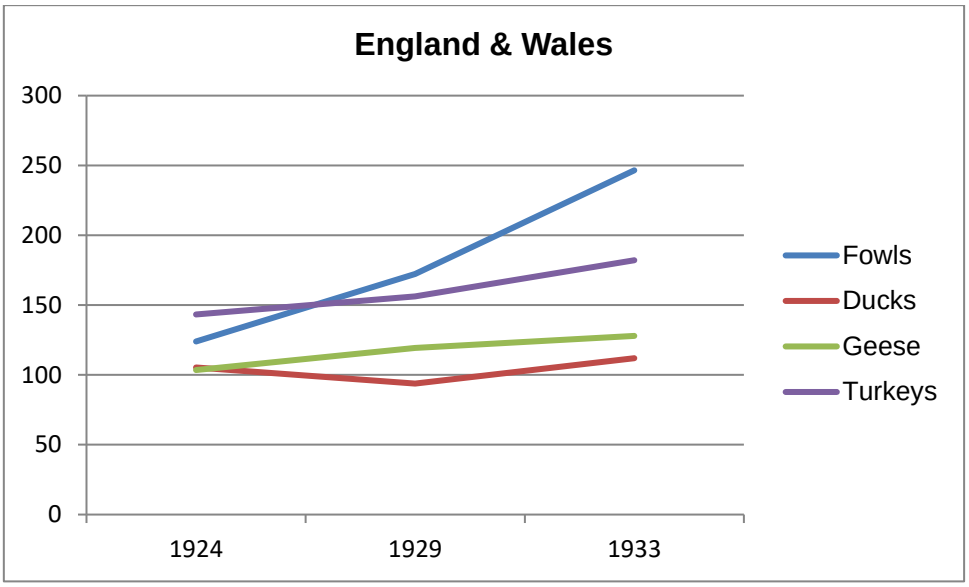

Figure 25: Changes in poultry numbers in England and Wales, 1921–33 (1921 = 100).[58]

[56] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 22 September 1927, p. 3.
[57] 'DCC Agriculture Committee', 18 June 1931, p. 2.
[58] Lawrence, 'Agricultural Knowledge Transfer in Devon 1919–1939', Chapter 2.

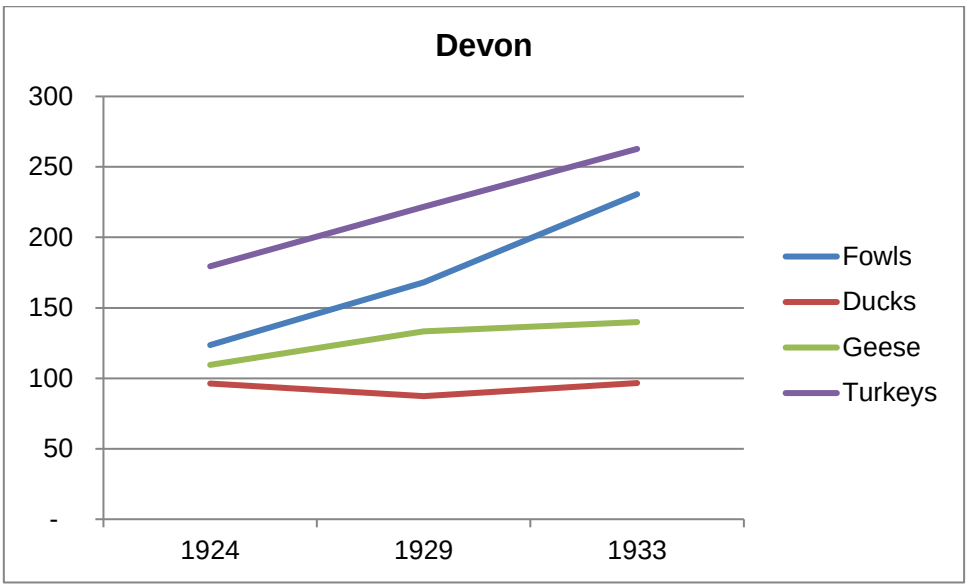

Figure 26: Changes in poultry numbers in Devon, 1921–33 (1921 = 100).[59]

Devon follows the national trend for fowls, is slightly above average for geese, below average for ducks and well above average for the increase in turkey numbers.

Fowls were the most numerous, followed by ducks; the total number of turkeys overtook geese by 1924 and remained higher, apart from 1927.

When compared per 1,000 acres of crops and grass, fowls increased consistently though the 1920s, the numbers of other poultry remained within a narrower range, although the composition varied.

Labour

In 1921 and then thereafter from 1923, returns required occupiers to record regular and casual labour subdivided into Males Over 21; Males Under 21; and Females and Girls (taken together). The occupier or principal partner and his wife were excluded, along with a range of ancillaries such as gardeners, housekeepers and so on. Women and girls were only employed in small numbers in most of the study areas, although in higher numbers in Bere Ferrers and Exeter, and again may be associated with market gardening.

Taking the1925 data for full-time equivalent per 1,000 acres of crops and grass, there are low rates (18–20) for Chulmleigh, Holsworthy Black Torrington, Winkleigh, West Dartmoor and the Blackdowns; higher rates for Crediton (22), Kenton (23) Moretonhampstead (24) and Ottery (28);

[59] Penny Lawrence, 'Agricultural Knowledge Transfer in Devon 1919–1939', Chapter 2.

and exceptionally high rates in Bere Ferrers (50) and Exeter (71). This accords with the fact that arable farming requires more labour than pastoral, and that market gardening requires more labour than other forms of crop growing.

The reality of how difficult it was to collect accurate data is well conveyed by an extract from the detailed day-by-day work diaries kept by Tom Robins, who farmed at South Lydcott, High Bray, on Exmoor. He appears to have employed on a full-time basis one man, Walter. Another man, R. Ridd, occurs doing work on a reasonably frequent basis. Most weeks there are also tasks done by 'men', presumably casual local labour, as Walter is usually recorded doing something different. A sample fortnight from the diaries is reproduced in the table below:

Table 4: Extracts from Tom Robins' diaries, South Lydcott, High Bray, February 1925[60]

1 Feb	No entry (Sunday)
2 Feb	Men pulled down load of common turnips put under hedge. I went to Exeter. Diseases of Animals meeting
3 Feb	Walter plough morning. Wet afternoon
4 Feb	We took rest of clover rick Dean Linhay
5 Feb	Men threshing cutting chaff and sawing wood morning. Afternoon Walter took same to Discombe
6 Feb	Barum. [settling accounts]. Men took in rick of oats from Clover field
7 Feb	I ploughed Headlands to Middle Long Down. Cutting chaff, threshing and grinding
8 Feb	No entry (Sunday)
9 Feb	Walter finished Long Down and started Little Field. Took out two load of turnips to ewes. R. Ridd help marking in field. I went to Winkleigh with Mr D Pureham over Sawle Farm for Diseases of Animals Committee
10 Feb	Walter drew out two load of turnips to ewes, afterwards plough
11 Feb	Walter went to Brayford after two sacks barley. R Huxtable owes for five more. Took up rest of cake paid for, 6 cwt of cake. Afterwards plough Little Field. Afternoon wet. Walter about bullocks. R. Ridd and I made two bullock troughs. Put higher side Dean Linhay.
12 Feb	R Ridd and I made two bullock troughs. Put lower side Dean Linhay. Walter drawing dung morning. Afternoon ploughing … field.
13 Feb	I went to Exeter. Diseases of Animals meeting. Forgot what men were about but Walter drawing dung and drove some stone for Mr Street. Put N. Molton heifer to bull again.
14 Feb	Ditto

[60] Tom Robins diaries, quoted with permission (Stuart Windsor).

Conclusion

This essay opened with a quotation from Currie and Long's *An Agricultural Survey in South Devon*, published in 1929, about the nature of farming in Devon. In their foreword they also wrote about the context of farming. They drew a picture of farmers 'slowly adjusting their output to the new conditions', by which they meant a world in which competition from Argentina, Australia, Denmark and New Zealand, facilitated by the 'quickness of modern transport and the efficiency of cold storage', made farmers vulnerable.[61] Had their focus in the foreword not been on livestock, they could equally have added competition from North America in relation to wheat. This study of the Agricultural Statistics collected during the 1920s for the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries contributes to understanding how in one particular county farmers were coping with the challenge of worldwide competition during the 1920s.

Much of what the study shows for Devon mirrors the picture for the country as a whole. In particular the decrease in crops (wheat, barley and oats) is set against a rise in livestock and poultry keeping and in the production of cider apples and early vegetables. Generally the preliminary analysis shows that, as always, farmers took decisions about the appropriate type of farming based on their experience of farming in their own localities. Devon's moorland farmers operate very differently from those in the more fertile grasslands to the east and particularly the arable lands on the estuaries and the coast. They did respond to incentives and disincentives, and the 1920s shows their response to the Corn Production Act and its repeal. They also responded to trends in consumption by increasing poultry keeping, for example; and to initiatives in the food processing sector, e.g. liquid milk. But they rejected development that was inappropriate in local circumstances, e.g. the replacement of horses by tractors, and the growing of sugar beet when there was no local factory to process it.

There is scope to explore these statistics further by transcribing and analysing the data not so far used. An initial proposal has been to undertake comparisons with data from other counties. Some questions, however, cannot be answered by the use of these statistics. It is, for example, impossible to identify where cows were kept primarily for dairy purposes and where for beef production, as MAF did not collect this information separately until 1936. More could be done to explore specialisation at parish level. This study has identified specialisation in Bere Ferrers for its early fruit and vegetables, Moretonhampstead for potatoes and Kentisbeare for the rearing of fowls. What were the factors that led to such specialisation? These examples suggest they would include the

[61] Currie and Long, 1929, p. xi.

nature of the soil, the changes in transport availability, and possibly also the interest of particular individuals. Inter-parish comparisons could also highlight variations in practice.

Another area for exploration would be to link more sources of different types to develop the picture of farming at a parish or individual farm level. Tom Robins' diaries from Exmoor have been quoted above in relation to the understanding of how farm labour was used, and they provide an in-depth record of the daily work of the farm. Other farm diaries are also available, e.g. those of William Batting of Langford, Newton St Cyres or those used by Jacqueline Sarsby for the area around Throwleigh;[62] records of the markets around the county and references to them in local newspapers.

At the end of Currie and Long's foreword quoted above, they stated that their in-depth study of 200 farms in the south of the county, which had included appraisal of farm accounts, led them to suggest that the best chance for farmers to remain profitable was to switch their emphasis from the production and sale of beef, mutton and butter to the production and sale of fluid milk, eggs and poultry, which were not so easily imported and for which growing urbanisation created ready markets. This study shows that across the county, where they could, farmers had already been taking steps to develop in this direction. As Paul Brassley suggests, Devon farmers in the 1920s were much like their counterparts in other parts of the UK: they changed their practice in response to price changes, controlled their costs and were careful not to expand or to invest too much.[63]

[62] Devon Heritage Centre, ZBKR/1/2, diary 1893–1937; Jacqueline Sarsby, *A Dartmoor Farmer, His Daughters and His Diary*, (Rotherfold Press 2018).
[63] Paul Brassley, personal communication, 6 September 2024.