

Manx Notes 649 (2024)

“A FEW DAYS IN MANX LAND” (1875)

[2d] Resuming our notes relative to the Isle of Man, we shall now glance at some of the agricultural features of the Island.

The length of the Island is about 30 miles, and its greatest breadth 12 miles. The area is estimated at 145,000 acres. The last complete return of the crops and stock—namely, the official return for 1873—states that there were in that year 89,700 acres under crops and grass, leaving the balance to be accounted for as mountain land, not included in the return. Clay slate is the prevailing rock, but granite is found in some parts, and mountain limestone occupies a limited area in the southern part of the Island. The soil is mostly of a light description, the subsoil being in many places either clay or marl; but in the southern portion the soil is of a stronger character than it is in the north. The soil on the mountains is thin and poor, but, nevertheless, cultivation has in many parts been pushed to a high elevation on these mountains. The climate is very mild and equal, but moist; the latter quality being in favour of the light soils of the Island, which would not be so productive as they are with a light or unevenly distributed rainfall.

The estates or properties in the Isle of Man are for the most part small, and are generally farmed by the owners. At the same time, there are a number of tenant-farmers in the Island, chiefly Scotchmen, who rent holdings of considerable extent. In its general appearance the Isle of Man resembles very much what we are accustomed to see in many parts of Ireland—namely, small fields enclosed by crooked banks of earth, which are covered with a luxuriant growth of whins, brambles, and wild roses. On improved estates ground hedges are being substituted for the ancient earth fences. There is some good farming in the parishes of Andreas and Lezayre, in the vicinity of Ramsey, but the southern portion is considered the most important agricultural district in the Island.

The rotation usually followed is the four-course shift, extended by one or two years' pasture into a five or six-years' course, thus: (1) oats, (2) green crop, (3) wheat or barley, with grass seeds, (4) hay, (5 and 6) pasture. In some parts wheat is grown after lea, instead of oats. The following is a statement of the acreage under the different crops, pasture, &c, in 1873, the returns for last year being incomplete when the general summary of crops in Great Britain were published:

Wheat, 7,744; Barley, 6,821; Oats, 11,338; Rye, 30; Beans, 362; Peas, 1,021; Potatoes, 3,694; Turnips and Swedes, 8,073; Mangel, 85; Carrots, 232; Cabbage, &c 21; Vetches, 203; Fallow, 652; Clover, &c, for hay 8,295; Ditto, not for hay 22,837;

Permanent pasture, meadow, or grass (exclusive of mountain land): For hay, 2,677;
Not for hay, 15,568;

Large quantities of artificial manures are used in the Isle of Man—in fact, it appears to be quite a paradise for manure agents; but from what came under our notice we suspect that the home-made material, farm-yard dung, does not receive the attention or care it ought to get. Seaweed is east in abundance upon the southern shores of the Island, and is much used, when it is obtainable, as manure. But the state of the crops in many fields tell plainly that it is dung they require. The hay crop is seldom very heavy, and the pasture which follows is thin in the bottom, which arises partly from the land not being sufficiently enriched, and also from the inferior quality of the grass seeds used. Wherever those essentials have been properly attended to, the pasture is fair. Potatoes are invariably grown in drills, and these, as well as turnip drills, are all made across the face of the slope, or at an angle, not up and down the face, as is usually the case in other places. In fact, all the ploughing in hilly ground seems to be done on this principle. We observe that a writer in the *Agricultural Gazette* argues that moisture is better retained in light, steep land, when it is ploughed or drilled across the slope than by ploughing up and down the slope; but we cannot say whether any consideration of this nature induced Manx farmers to adopt and adhere to the practice. The land does not appear to be overwell cleaned previous to its being drilled either for potatoes or turnips. Thinning or singling turnips is done chiefly by the hand, and not with a hoe. The potatoes grown in the Isle of Man are usually of excellent quality, and heavy crops of turnips are produced; but although the land is well suited for the purpose, we understand that it is not customary to consume any part of the turnip crop by sheep folded upon it. A few farmers do carry out this practice, and if general it would be much for the advantage of the after crops.

The average wages for ploughmen are 15s. a week; they are also engaged by the year, getting their food in the farm-house, in addition to a money wage. The food of the labouring class in Man consists of tea, barley bread, and potatoes, with herrings, either fresh or salt, according to the time of the year. When boarded in their employer's house, they have usually oatmeal porridge and milk once a day, and boiled meat and soup for dinner three days in the week. The men employed on farms have something of an amphibious look about them, as there is usually some part of their dress which smacks of salt water. and this, we dare say, arises from the circumstance [2c] that young Manxmen are much in the habit of going to the herring fishing at some period of their lives. Women are employed a good deal in field-work; the Manx women are, in fact, very active and industrious, and for the most part appear to be “the head of the family,” taking an active part in the management of all matters out-of-door as well as in-door. They do the marketing, are very cleanly in their habits, and have a comfortable, well-to-do look about them.

The “good man” appears to occupy a subordinate position, and “women’s rights” have long been recognised by Manx laws, as it is said there is still an old law in the statute book which enacts that a man cannot sell his land without his wife’s consent; and quite right that it should be so, considering the part she takes in conducting the affairs of the place.

The official returns for 1873 give the following as the number of live stock in the Island: Horses 5,733; Cattle 19,994; Sheep 66,728; Pigs 4,774.

The returns for last year are not complete; but in those cases where the numbers are given they do not differ materially from those in the return for 1873. It is likely, however, that there will be a considerable deficiency when the returns for the current year are made up, from the circumstance that, owing to the scarcity of food last spring, unusual numbers of cattle and horses—in fact, everything that would sell—were sent to England, although prices at the time were very low and that there is a scarcity of cattle in the Island is quite evident when travelling through different parts of it. If the young shoots of the innumerable whin bushes growing on the fences had been utilised, there need have been no apprehension of any scarcity of food for either cattle or horses; but, so far as we could ascertain, the value of whin shoots, or gorse, as forage does not appear to be appreciated by Manx farmers.

The farm horses in Man are generally small, but active and hardy. Of late years the breed has been crossed with the Clydesdale, which has given more size; and probably in course of time the pony or cob breed, will, in a great measure, be crossed out. As there are no foxes in the Island, there is, of course, no special inducement to breed hunters.

The native breed of sheep, which exists in considerable numbers, are of the same type as the Welsh sheep—narrow in the chest and back and light in the shoulder. Some are polled and others horned, and for the most part the hair on the legs is of a reddish or dun colour. The carcass, when the animal is fat, seldom exceeds 8 or 9 lbs the quarter, but the mutton is very superior. The ewes are capital nurses and make their lambs very fat, and the flesh is exceedingly delicate and finely flavoured. The sheep are wild in their nature, and when brought to the low grounds it is necessary to abridge their powers of leaping by fastening a fore and a hind leg together, by means of a woollen strap about a foot long, having a running noose on each end. Even when fettered in this manner they get along at a great rate, if disturbed, hopping on three legs. Leicesters have been introduced into the Island, but the favourite imported breed is, we think, the Shropshire, and we saw some very good flocks of that breed.

Manx swine would cut a poor figure in any Irish or an English show-yard. They are, for the most part, ugly brutes, and they cannot be thrifty animals. There is much room for improvement in this class of Manx farm live stock.

The ordinary description of cattle in the Island is coarse, and of no particular type, but not unlike a bad description of old-fashioned Irish cattle. We observed several Ayrshire cows in different parts, and that breed appears to do well in the Island. Some of the leading farmers have imported short-horn bulls, and also females of that breed; but as yet the shorthorn has not left its distinct impress upon Manx cattle. It will be some time before there is any marked improvement in the ordinary description of cattle bred in Man. The farmers are not sufficiently particular about the bulls they use, and probably they would take one of their own runts quite as readily as the best bull that ever came from Holker or Warlaby, provided the Manx runt cost a few shillings less than the other for service. Manx farmers evidently require a little education on this point; for the improvement of their breed of cattle is really a matter of great importance to them, because it would add much to the wealth of Island. They can grow cattle food well, and it is just a waste of turnips to expend them in feeding the cattle they mostly possess. The same food they are now giving their inferior cattle would feed a much more profitable class of animate.

The principal herd of short-horns in the Isle of Man is the herd which Mr Burnyeat has on the farm at Grenaby, situated about four miles north of Ramsey. This herd was originally founded by Mr Lace, who has still the management of it; and Mr Burnyeat follows the lead which Mr Lace gave him in sticking to Booth blood. We spent a couple of hours very pleasantly at Grenaby, looking through the cattle, which are kept in a nice state without any artificial food, and the fine bloom on their coats shows that they don't require it.

The principal stud bull at Grenaby is Sir Windsor Broughton, 27507, bred by the late Mr Carr, and got by Prince of the Realm from Windsor's Queen, by Windsor. He is, therefore, of the Warlaby Bliss tribe, to which tribe Windsor's Pince, 32881, another of Mr Burnyeat's bulls, also belongs. He was likewise bred by Mr Carr, and is by Peer of the Realm, 25057, from Windsor's Queen. Sir Windsor Broughton is by no means a show bull, but his calves are handsome, and have all great quality. Windsor's Prince is a different style of animal, and might be turned into the ring at any show in the kingdom. He is a very thick hull, with first-rate fore-flank and rib, and is very good over the loin. There is a little depression behind the top of the shoulder, but he had just cast his hair when we saw him, and the weak point, therefore, came out more plainly than it would do when he has his full coat of hair upon him.

On turning into the field we found Mr Burnyeat's purchases at the Islanmore sale, last March, in a group. These were Brigantine, Victoria 45th, and Mr Downing's Farewell 2nd. They all look remarkably well—Brigantine never looked better—and it is hoped they are in a fair way to repay the good prices which Mr Burnyeat paid for them. Any one of them is enough to give a character to a herd.

We have not exhausted our notes of matters in Manx Land, but we must conclude for the present, hoping that at some future time we may again enjoy a holiday in that pleasant isle; and as we have been describing Manx places and customs, we cannot do better than wind up with a Manx New-year's Day rhyme, as an expression of our best wishes for all Manx folk:

Whether man, woman, or girl, or boy,
That long life and happiness all may enjoy;
May they of potatoes and herrings have plenty,
With butter and cheese, and each other dainty;
And may they sleep never, by night or by day,
Disturbed be by even the tooth of a flea.

“A Few Days in Manx Land (From the *Irish Farmers' Gazette*).” *Manx Sun*
17 July 1875: 2d–e.

Stephen Miller RBV

*