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Rare Breeds at Shugborough

Shugborough Park Farm was built in the early 19th century, probably to the design of one of the Wyatt family, as home farm for the Anson estate. It is a typical model estate farm of the period, built around a rectangular courtyard and incorporating an agent's house, cattle sheds, granary, water-powered corn mill, malt-house and greenhouse. No fodder storage was provided as this was available at White Barn, a group of buildings some 400 yards away, now used as a storage area by the County Estates Department.

The farm remained the Home Farm until the mid 19th century when the buildings and land were let to a tenant. Shugborough Park Farm then remained a tenanted holding until some two years ago. The land then passed to the County Estates Department who let it on annual grazing tenancies, and the buildings eventually came to the County Museum in 1974.

The Museum had been collecting agricultural material for ten years and was urgently in need of display and storage areas for these collections. The opportunity of acquiring such an appropriate setting in which to display some of this material seemed too good to miss.

The County Council have made small sums of money (£5000 in the current financial year) available for the restoration of the buildings and this work is being carried out by the Museum's technical staff, with help from a number of school leavers employed under the Manpower Services Commission's "Job Creation Scheme". It is estimated that the restoration of the buildings will take approximately five years.

The livestock side of the project is funded on a voluntary basis, apart from the provision of labour by the County Council, and small amounts from the existing museum estimates for the "Purchase of Exhibits", which have been spent on stock purchases.

The livestock project arose from important connections between Shugborough, and Staffordshire, and a number of rare breeds. At the time the farm was built, Shugborough was the home of a particularly fine herd of Longhorn cattle, which came from Fowler of Little Rollright, via Coke of Norfolk, whose daughter Ann Margaret married into the Anson family and probably encouraged their interest in agriculture.

In addition, we are only a few miles from Chartley Castle, the former home of the famous herd of White Park cattle which left the county for Bedfordshire in 1905, and the possibility of displaying these cattle had been under consideration for some time before the farm became available.

Staffordshire is also the home of the Tamworth pig, probably the rarest of British pig breeds, and we had come into contact with Mr. Jos Holland, now over 80 years of age, and at that time the only breeder of Tamworth's left in the county, in the course of our collecting activities.

Finally, the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in which Shugborough is situated includes Cannock Chase, and the tan-faced Cannock Heath sheep kept on the Chase in enormous numbers in the 18th century, and illustrated and described by Pitt in his "Agriculture of the County of Stafford" in 1791, were the direct ancestors of the modern Shropshire, a Down breed currently very close to the danger level.

Thus, we had on our doorstep two breeds of cattle, and one each of sheep and pigs, all of local historical importance, all very rare and in need of investigation and preservation.

The County Land Agent indicated that he would be prepared to release, at a suitable rent, some of the parkland adjacent to the farm buildings - up to a maximum for the present of 41 acres - and certain of the farm buildings could be fairly easily converted to house the stock. The only things missing were the necessary cash and, apart from myself, the staff needed to care for the animals.

We were fortunate in overcoming the second problem by appointing Bob Watson-Smith as Caretaker of Shugborough Park Farm. It was obvious that adding such a large area to the museum buildings would necessitate additional caretaking staff and, though at the time we had no clear idea of where the cash would come from, we specified in our advertisement that the Caretaker "could have to care for livestock at some point in the future". Bob came to us from Herefordshire College of Agriculture, Holme Lacey, in July, 1975, and shortly after Christmas was giving up his weekends to help conduct a nine-month old Longhorn bull on an extended tour of local boozers to publicise the project and help raise the necessary cash!

Together we are now responsible for eight cattle, twenty-four pigs, seven sheep and seventeen poultry, which brings me to my first warning - livestock projects grow very rapidly. Despite stating very clearly from the commencement of the project that we were confining our efforts strictly to the breeds already mentioned, Tamworth pigs, Shropshire sheep, Longhorn and White Park cattle, plus Redcap and Old English Game fowls, I have so far had great difficulty persuading various people that I do not want, even as a gift, Wild boars, Fallow and Red deer, Jacob and Dorset Down sheep, Lop rabbits and sundry other creatures.

We decided at an early stage to restrict the number of breeds and to attempt to keep the stock in as large numbers as we could possibly manage. I had been a member of the Rare Breeds Survival Trust from an early point in its life and did not want to fall into the trap of showing the public a very wide selection of breeds, and providing them with excellent entertainment, but doing nothing for the breeds concerned.

We therefore established the following minimum target flock/herd sizes:

Longhorn cattle	6 - 8 cows
Chartley cattle	6 - 8 cows
Tamworth pigs	9 sows
Shropshire sheep	20 - 30 ewes

these being the minimum numbers we felt would make a worthwhile contribution to the survival of the breeds and, at the same time, have a reasonable chance of paying for their keep.

Small numbers of a variety of breeds, for example pairs of cattle, which I know are kept in more than one farm park, cause considerable problems with extra buildings and fencing and force the maintenance of far too many, largely out of work, males. Artificial insemination is available through the Longhorn Cattle Society, and now, thanks to the Rare Breeds Survival Trust, for White Park cattle. There are problems however - AI is not always 100 per cent successful with beef cattle breeds and uncontrolled use of AI can easily result in the loss of valuable blood lines.

AI is relatively easily arranged for pigs but there are problems with semen life and again the problem of reducing blood lines. With pigs you have the additional problem that if you keep a boar, you have to keep him busy or he forgets what to do. Nine or ten sows per boar is a very bare minimum, and twenty would be preferable. We decided on nine sows as an initial target, as this will enable us to farrow in batches of three and therefore reduce the requirement for accommodation. As usual with stock, Sod's Law applies and we are currently farrowing two and one, though this will eventually sort itself out. One difficulty in purchasing stock is that breeder's records tend to be as old-fashioned as the stock they keep and it is difficult to buy pregnant females with any certainty as to farrowing or calving date.

An idea of the importance of maintaining even such small numbers of stock as we are keeping at Shugborough can be obtained from the fact that there are currently around 260 Longhorn females, and less than 200 White Park females in the country, and that the largest, of about twenty, Shropshire flock numbers around 100 ewes. The last volume of the Tamworth Herd Book included the registration of only 21 females, with an average life expectancy of 4-5 years.

Having briefly mentioned the breeds concerned and the numbers in which we plan to keep them, I will now summarise the Management systems we have adopted.

The Longhorns are managed on a single-suckler basis and the Chartley, when they arrive, will be managed in the same way. Each cow raises her own calf, to be used for beef or breeding, the beef animals to be finished for sale fat at about two years old. In the case of the loss of a calf or a large milk surplus, Hereford X Friesian calves, generally heifers, will be bought in.

Longhorn milk is high in butterfat but yield is low, and they are not worth milking. Liquid milk sales, in addition, provide lots of public health regulation problems and increased labour costs.

The cattle are at present wintering and calving outside, though we plan eventually to bring weaned calves in for their first winter and to provide a small covered yard, into which we can bring cows for calving. The cattle are all registered with the Longhorn Cattle Society and are Brucellosis Accredited, though this provides some problems in additional costs, due to the need to provide double fencing to separate our stock from non-accredited graziers stock in the adjoining parkland.

One of the buildings at the rear of the farm is being converted to provide a bull pen and yard, including a catching crate, and the bull, who is at the moment on holiday in Derbyshire with twelve lively young Shorthorn females, will not normally be accessible to the public except when led out by museum staff.

All feedstuffs are at present bought-in, though we will be growing our own hay, starting next year. Any attempt to plough up portions of the park for crops other than grass would be likely to meet with opposition from several quarters, though it may eventually be possible to grow some kale along wood boundaries to the mutual benefit of ourselves and the gamekeeper.

The present cattle stock comprises three heifers purchased from the "Grendon" herd in Warwickshire, an eighteen month old bull "Birbury Boy" and four calves, two Longhorns and two crossbreds.

We are in the course of establishing our Shropshire flock and now have two old ewes and five lambs, purchased from the Grangewood and Stretton Court flocks and will be buying a ram and possibly two or three more ewes next summer. This year the two old ewes have been put to Mr. Wood's Shropshire ram, while the ewe lambs are running with a Ryeland ram which should get slightly smaller lambs and help to reduce lambing problems. Once fully established the Shropshire flock will produce both breeding stock for sale and fat lambs for the butcher.

The sheep will tie in well with the cattle, though fencing for sheep is of course expensive, and Shropshires, being one of the larger and more active Down breeds, need good fencing. Housing requirements for sheep are limited, though we plan to build some small field shelters and hope eventually to build a timber lambing shed which will also serve as fodder storage for the early part of the winter.

The Tamworth sows are at present farrowing in temporary scaffolding crates in a range of three small loose boxes. At weaning the sows move into the boar pen and then into an outside paddock in the derelict walled garden, while the weaners remain in the loose boxes until they reach pork weight (c. 130 lbs liveweight) at about five months old.

Tamworths will do well on outdoor management systems, but the National Trust, who own the property, were not terribly keen on armies of ginger pigs sallying forth from corrugated iron shelters to plough up the parkland. We hope in the next twelve months to erect a permanent timber building, carefully screened to reduce impact on the park landscape, which will provide farrowing pens, dry sow stalls and a boar house. The three loose boxes will then be converted to provide more suitable fattening pens complete with a slurry pit for easy manure disposal. Manure disposal is an important point to watch on any farm open to the public, who tend to turn up in most unsuitable footwear and are not at all keen on a muck heap in the middle of the yard! A slurry system will, as well as reducing bedding costs, considerably reduce the labour requirement for pen cleaning.

The fowls, Derbyshire Redcaps and Old English Game, were forced to live on free range last summer, resulting in considerable damage to my garden, but the technical staff are now busy constructing small pens to house breeding trios and quartets. These pens will be fitted with trap nests, enabling us to be very selective in our breeding programme.

All the stock I have mentioned are fed on proprietary rations and we are using modern methods whenever possible, though shortage of cash does impose limits. For example, we cannot at present afford a tractor and when the grass got in front of the sheep last summer it was kept under control by a combination of volunteers with scythes and myself on a garden tractor.

The thinking behind our use of modern methods is as follows:

Firstly, I do not believe it to be possible to recreate a 19th century farm, or even an early 20th century one, at anything like a reasonable price, if at all. It is difficult enough to keep a good stockman without expecting him to get up at 4.00 a.m. to work horses, and we had no particular desire to become simply another purveyor of the rural myth.

Secondly, we are dealing with breeds which are in danger of extinction and feel that it is wise to use modern methods wherever possible, in order to ensure optimum breeding performance from that stock. In the 19th century pigs would have farrowed in deep manure and a large percentage of the young pigs would have been rolled on. I would prefer to use modern crates and to rear the maximum number of pigs from the small litters which Tamworths produce.

A further example of the difficulty of achieving 19th century pseudo-reality is in the difficulties associated with swill feeding. A large licence fee now has to be paid before one can feed swill, which will, in any case, reduce carcase quality.

Finally, part of our strategy in the preservation of rare breeds is to encourage other people to keep them and I feel that this is most likely to be successful if we display good quality stock, in conditions as close to those of a modern commercial farm as possible. One commercial farmer who decides to keep a few pedigree Longhorns or Tamworths, as one member of the Friends of Shugborough Park Farm has already done, is of more value to the breed than twenty nostalgia freaks who want to keep a pretty ginger pig at the bottom of the garden.

As part of our policy of breed promotion we are, in addition to making our males available to other breeders, following a full show programme and this year had exhibits at the Royal Show, the Rare Breeds Survival Trust Show and Sale and Birmingham Fatstock Show, as well as co-operating with the RBST on a display of rare breeds at Staffordshire County Show, which at present does not have competitive classes for any rare breeds. We will be attending all these shows next year with increased entries and will, in addition, be supporting the Longhorn breed classes at the Three Counties Show, which have been reinstated after a lapse of many years.

As I mentioned briefly at the beginning the bulk of the livestock project is funded by voluntary effort. We knew from the outset that funds would be in short supply and set about gathering together a group of people who would be able to give practical advice and to involve themselves in fund raising. The group included representatives from the local branch of the National Farmers' Union, Staffordshire College of Agriculture, Staffordshire Agricultural Society, the Rare Breeds Survival Trust and the Meat and Livestock Commission.

After several months work by this group the Friends of Shugborough Park Farm were launched in February, with Lord Lichfield as President. We were fortunate in having as our first Chairman, Mr. Jos Wood of Grangewood near Burton, also Chairman of the Shropshire Sheep Breeders' Association. Mr. Wood unfortunately died in a car accident and his enthusiasm and effort will be sadly missed.

Membership of the Friends now stands at well over 200 and they have been most successful to date, having raised over £4000 towards their five year target of £17,000.

There are, of course, many problems in being dependent on voluntary fund raising efforts, but also considerable advantages. The back-up services which the group provide are probably essential unless funds are unlimited. For example, the Meat and Livestock Commission have been most helpful in the marketing of our pigs and a member of the group has become our volunteer veterinary surgeon. Veterinary care is extremely important - on a public farm you cannot afford to leave a sick animal to see if it recovers - and, if you have to pay for it, extremely expensive.

Though the project is in its early stages we are very pleased with progress to date and look forward to having stable numbers of paying stock and being able to commence performance testing so that a research, as well as a preservation, element is brought into the scheme.

I think that the project is unique in a museum context, in that it has a valid contribution to the survival of the breeds concerned as one of its main objects.

Shropshire County Council's project at Acton Scott aims to create an early 20th century working farm, as does the larger scale project at Beamish. The only museum which has been actively involved in the preservation of a rare breed is the Manx Museum, which has for many years maintained a flock of Manx Loghtan sheep and made a very valuable contribution to the breed's survival. It is unfortunate that it is too late for similar efforts to save the Cumberland, Dorset Gold Tip and Lincolnshire Curly Coat pigs.

The approach of the farm parks is rather different - aimed entirely at visitor attraction - and in the case of only a few notable exceptions do they actively preserve the breeds concerned. The project closest in approach to our own is perhaps Mike Rosenberg's private establishment at Ash Farm in Devon, where he is fortunate to be able to work on a wide variety of breeds and is, of course, not disturbed by hordes of visitors.

To anyone considering keeping farm stock, and rare breeds in particular, in a museum context I would make the following suggestions:

1. Do not embark on such a project unless you can guarantee continuing availability of capable staff.
2. Do not attempt it unless you can acquire sufficient land. I would say that 20 acres should be an absolute minimum.
3. Stick to a limited number of, preferably, local breeds and try to keep reasonable numbers so as to make a useful contribution to their survival.
4. Register all your stock with the appropriate breed society.
5. Be prepared for unusual management problems to occur. In general rare breeds have not received the thorough investigation particularly of veterinary problems, which the common commercial breeds have undergone.
6. Be prepared for the public. They will expect a different breed in every building, show-clean pens at all times, and close access to livestock. Do not give in to them.
7. If you like to sleep at night, forget it!

Finally, a brief note on costs. The project was estimated, in the summer of 1975, to cost £17,000 over a five year period, at which point the stock should become self supporting, allowing for the provision of labour by the County Council. This figure did not take account of inflation, or of funds raised for investment in further fund-raising, and I would estimate that the final figure will be nearer £25,000.

Cost effectiveness is difficult to measure, as with any museum display and I am unsure how you assess the pleasure of the public who visit the farm. The only measure which I can apply is to relate the funds spent on purchase of exhibits, or invested in stock to be retained for display, to the total expenditure on the live-stock side of the project. Of the £4000 + raised by the Friends to date, over £2000 has been invested in the purchase of stock. Even if we take into account the cost of labour and the small amount spent on the conversion of buildings for stock, I wonder how many conventional museum activities can show such a good ratio between expenditure on purchase of exhibits and total running costs?

A. Cheese
Staffordshire County Museum.

(This is the text of the paper given at the B.C.G. A.G.M. in December 1976.

The one other unpublished paper, on Observation Beehives, has not yet been received).