

THE HISTORY OF THE ESSEX AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY

Foreword by the President

Col Sir John Ruggles-Brise Bt CB OBE TD

This History of the century-old Essex Agricultural Society makes enthralling reading. It unravels the growth, build-up and constant striving for perfection in ever-changing times of our famous Society. The scope is so wide that it can almost be said to be an account of Essex and its agriculture with all its ups and down during the last one hundred years. Hardly a corner of the County is not mentioned in some way or another.

Most of the distinguished agricultural families have served the Society in some capacity or other, together with outstanding Chairmen and Secretaries. Their work all culminates in our great Centenary County Show this year which Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother, has graciously consented to attend. Town and Country, Industry and Agriculture are all taking their full part, not least the County Town of Chelmsford.

We are indebted to Mr. John Walker for compiling this enjoyable record reminding us of the past, which should act as a challenge for the future.

JOHN RUGGLES-BRISE

Spains Hall, Finchingfield - May 1969

The Roots

Organisations don't just come out of the blue. They emerge when needs and aspirations become sufficiently clear for bodies of people to work together to achieve the ends they have in mind. But this is often a gradual process with small beginnings that merge together toward stronger and more widespread endeavour.

So, perhaps, it was before the Essex Agricultural Society came into being in 1858. Certainly there were a number of local agricultural societies in existence in the early part of the nineteenth century, although the records of them are few and sufficient only to show some indication of a developing pattern.

First of all, however, one must mention a County organisation, the Essex Society for the Encouragement of Agriculture and Industry, which came into existence in 1793. Judging by its promoters, F. Honeywood, Lord Howard and Lewis Majendie, the emphasis must have been on the agricultural side. Lord Howard of Audley End was in fact the founder President, and leading members included Mr. J. H. Strutt of Terling, Thomas Hanbury, Lord Petre, Mr. Parker and Josiah Smith, names which recur in the history of agricultural organisations in Essex. This Society proposed to hold meetings every September, to award a premium each year for the best stallion colt bred and reared on the owner's farm, and silver medals for the best two-year-old bull, two-year-old ram, and one-year-old bear. Local prizes were also to be awarded, in each of eight districts into which the Society divided the County, for good ploughmen and for "male servants in husbandry who shall have been employed the

longest in service with the best character ". That "character" seems to have been judged largely on their ability to rear large families with the least amount of poor relief.

The Local Societies

This Society held meetings in the Shire House at Chelmsford but there is no record of any annual shows having been held. It seems that the Society must have languished after a few years, to be revived, perhaps, as the Chelmsford and Essex Agricultural Society which was active from the mid-1830s, with Lord Rayleigh as President, with such names as Petre, Western, Tyrell, Lennard, Bramston, Tufnell, Disney, Round and Hanbury among the Vice-Presidents, and a committee which included Robert Baker and Fisher Hobbs, two well-known farmers of that time, and such Essex names, still well known today, as Oxley, Parker, Seabrook and Hutley. This Society held two meetings a year, a Spring Meeting held on the Tuesday nearest to the 21st of June (curious that they should have chosen the first day of summer for the Spring Meeting!) when there was a Show of Breeding Stock and a Sale of Wool; and a Christmas Meeting with a Show of Fatstock and Roots, when also prizes were distributed to "deserving labourers", notably those with long service and large families who had not taken parochial relief and who contributed to Benefit Societies.

At this time, in the 1830s, the effects of the Industrial Revolution were being severely felt by farmers. The Third Report of the Chelmsford and Essex Agricultural Society refers to the depressed state of farming and speaks of "those political adventurers who are endeavouring to build up short-term popularity on what they choose to term 'a measure of relief of the working hands', viz, the Repeal of the Corn Laws, for-getting or wilfully neglecting to tell their hearers that with their cheap bread they will be called upon to take cheap wages".

Similar organisations had been set up or were being set up in other parts of Essex. There was an East Essex Agricultural Society in 1819, which presented a petition to Members of Parliament about the depressed state of farming. This may have been the beginnings of the Tendring Hundred Agricultural Association which was certainly going strong twenty years later, in 1839, along the same sort of pattern as the Chelmsford and Essex Society. There was an East Essex and Dengie Agricultural Society a few years later. A Dunmow Agricultural Society was running ploughing matches in 1840 and may well have been formed earlier. There were similar societies at Witham, Orsett and Saffron Walden.

It should be mentioned, also, that at Chelmsford and Colchester particularly, and probably in other parts of the County, there were local horticultural societies which flourished from time to time, and by the 1850s, a Chelmsford and Essex Horticultural Association was putting on several shows a year.

Two-way Development

It would be good to have more information about the early days of many of these organisations, and perhaps the publication of this brief "history" may encourage some searching in old documents for the information which could provide a fuller story. So far as the fragmentary records go, they show that the farming organisations, in serving the general needs and aims, were developing in two ways: firstly, along the

road of encouragement of good farming by shows of livestock and produce, by ploughing matches and good service awards to workers. Secondly, the Societies were serving to get farmers and landowners together to express political objectives (in the widest sense) in a nation that was becoming increasingly absorbed in the profits to be made out of industrial development, with a cheap food policy contributing substantially to the cheapness of labour.

Thus you find that in the 1840s, after the Repeal of the Corn Laws, an "Essex Agricultural Protection Society" was formed, although it would seem that it must have languished very quickly. Earlier, in 1834, the Lexden and Winstree Hundred Agricultural Society had been set up specifically "to watch the proceedings of the legislature in all matters connected with Agriculture to frame petitions to Parliament to communicate with County Members to act in concert with other Associations of a similar description" and this Association got off the mark with a Petition to its MPs which referred to the "inadequate remuneration afforded by the present depressed value of agricultural produce" and said that "for a long time past the farmer has derived no fair return for his capital and has been deprived of the means of employing his accustomed number of labourers." It took a dig at the MPs by reminding them that the petition came from "an important district of the County of Essex with its population mainly dependent on the cultivation of the soil" and it ended by expressing the hope that "the House will adopt such salutary and judicious measures as shall rescue from ruin a large portion of His Majesty's subjects than whom none has been more conspicuous for loyalty."

It seems to have been a vain hope. Things went from bad to worse in the '30s and '40s, and one wonders why more effort was not made to "work in concert with other Associations of a similar description". The National Farmers' Union was not formed until 1908, with its Essex Branch in 1913. The landowning section of the farming community had no national organisation until the Central Land Association was set up in 1907 (the Regional organisation including Essex being set up in 1921). The Central Land Association later became the Central Landowners' Association and later still the Country Landowners' Association that we know today.

Perhaps this "action in concert" was the objective of the Essex Chamber of Agriculture, formed somewhere around 1867 and which had nearly 700 members in 1872, but one can find little record of its activities.

The Advancement of Agriculture

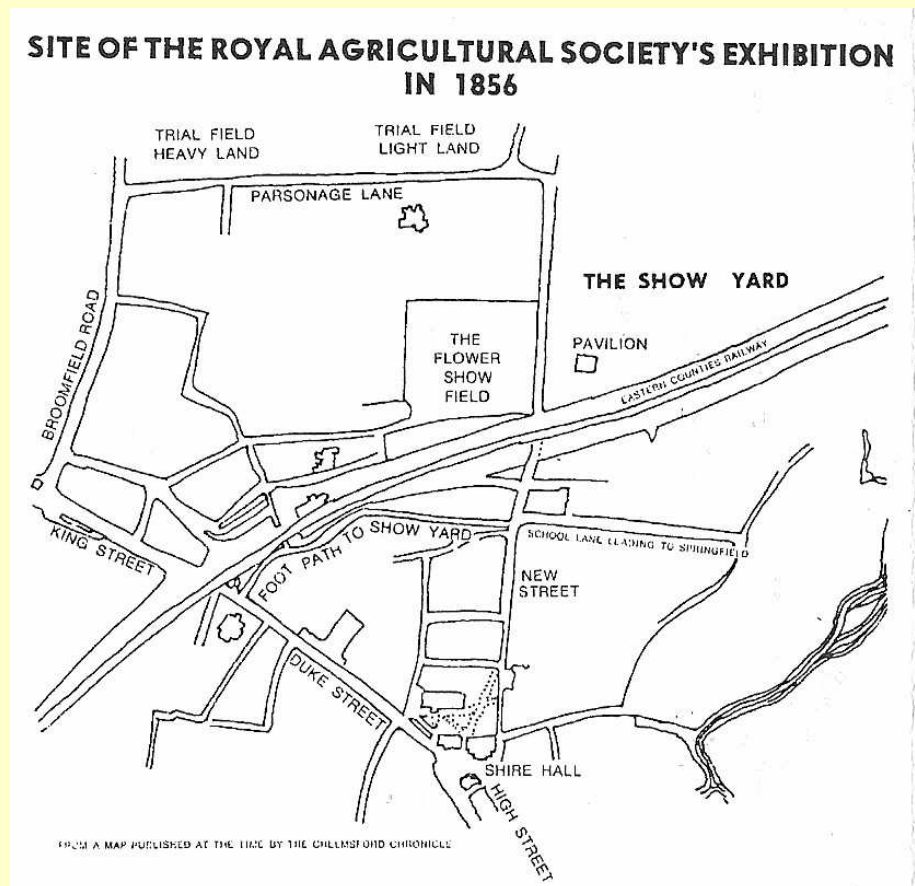
But enough of the political side of things. It is along the other road of development, the growth of organisations for the advancement of agriculture, its methods, machines, breeding of livestock, etc., that this little bit of Essex history is mainly concerned.

One needs to remember that in those days, a hundred or more years ago, there were no agricultural colleges, no agricultural advisory service, and "advancement" depended mainly on looking over the hedge and following the good examples where you could find them. The Royal Agricultural Society of England, which had been formed in 1838, was concerned largely with seeking out the good examples, putting them on show for all to see, and providing opportunities for progressive farmers, the innovators and experimenters, to meet and talk about their methods and machinery and materials and to exhibit them. One way of doing this was by holding their "exhibitions" in various parts of the country, and in 1856, by invitation of a group of

Essex farmers, and in particular a Mr. James Parker of Chelmsford, the Royal's Exhibition was held in Chelmsford. It is worth dwelling for a little while on that 1856 Exhibition, for it is an integral part of the history of the Essex Agricultural Society.

The Royal Agricultural Exhibition, 1856

Chelmsford really went to town for the Royal Agricultural Society's Exhibition, which lasted for a week from July 11th to Friday July 18th, 1856. The town was 'en fete' for the visitors who came from all over Essex, and those who came from London by the fairly new railway and who wended their way to the Show Ground via a footpath which (straightened out somewhat) lay along the line of the present Victoria Road and then by New Street and under the railway bridge to the Show Field - where you now see the Hoffmann Manufacturing Company's buildings. There was a sizeable "pavilion" there, roughly in the position of the railway goods depot at the present time. On the opposite side of New Street was the Flower Show Field, now occupied by Marconi Ltd. head office.



Friday, July 12th, and the following Monday were the days, apparently, for seeing the livestock and machinery and implements. On Tuesday and Wednesday there were trials of implements, on light land at Bishop's Hall farm (where the Marconi buildings now stand) and on heavy land at Patching Hall farm, along the Broomfield Road. Thursday was the day of the great Dinner and the Exhibition ended on Friday July 18th with a grand display of fireworks.

That dinner gives us a fair line to the appetites of our Victorian ancestors. Tickets cost 10/- each, a tidy amount of money in those days, but it looks as though the diners had their money's worth for a thousand of them were provided with 1,900 lb of

meat, 750 lb of poultry, "marrows, puddings, potatoes, jellies, blancmanges, etc" and bread and cheese and beer ad fib, as well as a bottle of wine per person.

Most of the cattle and horse classes carried first prizes of £30. By comparison one wonders what prompted the "top" of £43 for orchidaceous plants in the Grand Flower Show. The first for roses came down to £12 10s 0d, and for humble cucumbers, which were doing well to be in a flower show, anyway, the top was £1 10s 0d. It may be an indication of the tastes of the time that the "first" in wax flowers merited a prize of £3 15s 0d.

Toward an Essex Society

After the Royal Show and the implement trials, the dinner and the fireworks, came the reckoning. And it was a good one. The local people had raised a fund to put on the Exhibition of more than £3,000, and when all had been said and done, and the two local secretaries, Mr A Meggy and Mr F Chancellor, had been presented with a piece of plate and £100 apiece, there remained some £540 in the kitty. What was to be done with it?

There was a good deal of argument about the disposal of this money, and this had to be resolved by the local Committee which had collected the money. They met in the Shire Hall on December 18th 1857. One section of the Committee was anxious to use part of the money to provide a pedestal for a gun which had been captured at Sebastopol in the Crimean War and presented to the town of Chelmsford. Another section of the Committee would have none of this, and wanted to see all the money used for the purpose for which it was subscribed, "the advancement of agriculture". There was one specific proposal to use the money in providing prizes for the best stock shown at Chelmsford Christmas market. After a chairman's nightmare of propositions, amendments and substantive resolutions, a compromise was reached. The sum of £200 would go to provide a pedestal for the Sepastopol gun (it was erected at the entrance to the Shire Hall, Chelmsford, and afterwards moved to Oaklands Park where it can still be seen). The rest of the money was to be devoted to the advancement of agriculture, with a committee to be appointed to carry out this object.

The Committee

The committee appointed for this purpose comprised nineteen members "with power to add to their number". It got to work right away with a meeting on January 22nd, 1858, in the Shire Hall, Chelmsford, with Mr. Charles Du Cane (soon afterwards Sir Charles Du Cane) in the 'Chair, and there was a unanimous decision to apply the £336 now found to be available to "the formation of a County Agricultural Association, for the aid and advancement of agriculture and the promotion of enterprise and emulation among owners and occupiers of land", with the intention to hold shows annually "in such towns in the county as may hereafter be named "

This, then, was the start of the Essex Agricultural Society.

Further information about the history of the Society is being produced and will be available in a few weeks.